There Is No One What Will Take Care Of You

I

He moves through the forest raggedly and impatient like some kind of becloaked and wildhaired necromancer. Stumbling through the serried and fragrant rows of spruce and shagbark hickory with a staff of broken maple like an exiled entheomanic king, becaped and fleeing the throne with sceptre in hand. He is called Ruggles. Behold him passing warmly through the alabastrine and obloid shapes of late afternoon forest sunlight. Speaking silently to himself. Sussurations. A prayer. Wind brings the boughs and trunks to creaking and light revolves in cellular patterns upon the earth below. An owl, grey mottled with broad wings fanning, shuttled through the warmth under the canopies and wheeled over Ruggles through the trunks as if proctoring his passage through the forest and he watched as it slant down through the trees and tunneled invisibly in the upper rafters of a conifer as a bee might snug itself softly beneath the calyx of a flower. Bicycle wheel, spokes flaking away to rust alone grown through and suspended by a swarms of vine and ivy. The jaw of a racoon in the pitch the color of ivory beside a tree. Like some kind of primoidal tool. Seen before. Set at the tree trunk. He scans the panorama. Wild eyes. Coffee black. Cola brown. His hair a wild tapestry of unbrushed and self-cut and self-dyed brown black and bleached blonde. As if he were some kind of fellmonger having impecuniously and mosaically sewn his scrap hides together for a hat, varied as they were. Wandering the forest for his next pelt through the orchestral imbrication of birdsong, the colliding fritinancy of wrens and thrushes and blackcaps perched about the boughs of the forest sunning. Whistling in tubular wooden sounds that overlap and clink in the air of the branches like the sound of shattered glass being gently swept up from a wooden floor. Or squawking in triplets across the afternoon sky through the trees and the warm vernal air and accepting in preened tickering silence the singular echoing reply. The forest is balmy, almost humid, in full spring, and it smells richly of humus and menthollating conifer. Wings of hoverflies diaphanous and shimmering, hardly more substantial in their translucence than the warm light through which they sew in a sort of continous bouncing motion. Perhaps sprung therefrom into form. This is where that lead then. He pauses and breathes in deep and stands blinking and dazed for a moment in the shadow of a juniper. The world reeling about him in exhausted representation. See me through, Lord, at least, the dazzling and murderous wilderness, through this day of hunger, while yet still stricken to this haunted plane and form. Or let me die. A vulture swum out above from some rank perch and it swung blackly and lazily through the liquid heavens above. It cried out shrill across the dying sky, and the slow whomp of its leathery flap could be heard propulsing down to the floor of the forest in sickening warm waves.

With the prepossessory sun waxing mightily above as a perfect circle of white burning hydrogen, Ruggles passed along below, variously shadowed and silhouetted, crackling over the dislocate and decomposing leaves and twigs, poking about at the pitch with his walking stick. Swinging it in full whooshing decollation of bright green asparagus weed and barnyardgrass. Celodon stalks fleshy and pale, falling dumbly halfward in his wake and hanging there filipendulously. Still living at the root. A peeling green plastic bottle of detergent and a milk carton in slow elision laying strewn in a fernbreak. Torn black bagging in the barbs. An enormous bumblebee droned by slantward through a confluence of light and spiderweb androidally and indifferent to the

traveler. A bloodless creature. Light bending in acrobatic glissados that invert and asterisk in the concatenation of boughs and stipples the rough clods of pitch and lime green bramble. Ruggles moves along in this aspect of dubious maturity, swinging his stick and whacking various stalks to their sudden arbitrary end as he stalks along. His poncho's cloak whomping out and swirling about him as if he stood at the bottom of a dark pond with only his head above the swirling waters. He is thin right now and of average height. A man of sophisticated education and poor position. Oddly tattooed with colorful frogs and cats and the Madonna about his torso, all of it hidden away beneath his clothing and clustered there on his torso secretly like a Gulag inmate. A man of humble disposition, forgotten in a collapsed world, where vines grew untrimmed upon things of industry, and tethered to his position therein like the dogs he hears barking insanely and muted from behind the doors of shuttered homes as he passed, crying out insanely until hoarse and croaking from their animal hunger, left behind by their owners some months before. Crying out no more these days. So much for one life to witness. And it has been some near four decades of this earthly suffering Ruggles has endured by the time this occurs, and his child's heart still slings out before him headlong dumbly for limerance or heaven it is the same for him. But this is a world without love now, as it was. Only confirmed. He trundles along, this half-crazed and starving Elijah. Yellow leaves falling slantwise before him through the forest like a flock of goldfinches landing. A thousand years of suffering do manifest in both his gait and his tortured eyes. They are blood-rimmed, they narrow in speculation almost always. Behold. See the grief in them now, as he casts his dark eyes frenetically about the leafstrewn forest floor. Casts his bloodshot eyes about furtively and narrowed at the tired lids, as if potentially projecting the very image of the earth he walked on and such a laborious one at that. And there now he goes scrambling down a muddy slope, following along a dry creek bed. Slummocking through the quartz-sparkling alluvium along where rainwaters in a season before ran thinly in tinkling skeins. A farrago of damp and glistening pebbles upon which he himself goes slanting and shifting upon tan desert boots of gumsole. He wears above these pants of dark brown corduroy and a billowing black poncho, ornamented about its length with brightly-colored chenille patches. Patches of caricatured animals growling and regal birds in flight and various geographic representations. Places he has never been and will never go in these days of collapse. Places he would have never gone all of this notwithstanding, a sort of hermetic man. Still his chosen dreamcoat so much rain has he moved through. A small leather satchel diagonal across the front of his person. Tablets. Cigarettes. And drifting along like some dark druid in this patchen cloak, the sky vaulting up at his sides enormous and waterblue like a great blue ocean parted for his passage. Or perhaps mirrored tsunamis conjured up at his sides. Seaspume about the crest of these waves manifest in the ragged cloudwork sliding vaporously above, revolving on their watery axis and beleaguering the sun with their ragged metallic droplets and ghostly forms. Swarming slowly about it from any side. Behold below, though, this dark-eyed magus still tumbling along this creek bed like a wood nymph cursed to the task and the path alone so grim is his expression studying the ground he trods. A tarp bundled up under the boughs of a spruce and slick with scum and rain water. Scrunched sleeping bag swarmed over with rosebush and barbs. Starlings launched warbling across the warm wooden columns and Ruggles watched their neat flight path weave easily through the tree trunks and the horizontal boughs. Chattering through the breeze almost mystically like miniature digital griffins. The wind died and then blew a gust that cowled the

collar of the poncho about Ruggle's gaunted face and he held it there fast with his free hand. Wind rippling. Dracula in the glimpsing translation of the sunlight through the latticework of leaves mingling above, furred and deciduous alike. Corruscating cicada molt the color treesap, clung to the bark of beech trunk and glistening in a careful thought of sunlight. A rustling in the emerald brush and a family of deer not seen until this moment animated over the right shoulder. Their enormous kind brown eyes regarding him. Chewing. The buck silhouetted in an opalescent chamber of sunlight that dropped directly downward into the forest onto his form and the regal horned animal looking away from this man as if he were not there, striding about mildly, muscles pumping and twitching against his flaxen and tick-flecked coat, nipping at clover on the forest floor. A hornet's nest vibrating in the boughs of a bald cypress like some huge evil paper mache egg. Needling sunlight. Miniature shadows ferocious and crazed, buzzing aggressively and swinging down therefrom at him. These white-ringed small assassins would kill me if they could, that is certain. Can sting repeatedly, they can. Violent constellation. He passed along some paces further on and turned back, eyeing the hornet's nest and the sickening busywork about it's ovaloid form. Wood pulp and saliva. Some glistening huge hornet at the center slick with the excreta of reproduction pumping and feeding. So many desperate husbands. He fetched up a stone off the ground, this man of near forty, wandering through a collapsed world, and sent it shuttling in a rasping orbit toward the hive and it connected thickly with the bulbous thick of it and the exodus of hornets was so plentiful and repugnant, so incensed, that their sound carried audibly past him through the greater forest beyond. Now behold this whelmed man, antic now through the flickering forest, gait accelerating and crazed, as if harried along by goblins at the back. He reaches an ivy-strewn fence panting and glancing back over his shoulder. Enter ye in at the strait gate ahead. The sound of hornets waning in distant vibration. He looks about blinking and breathing. He spits and touches the fence. It smells of rocks and rust and creekwater. Of vines and pollen. Ruggles takes a few steps back and lunges at the fence, pushing hard against the springing grey knotted metal with his soles as he scales the top and brings his legs over one at a time and drops hard upon the compacted pitch there on the counter side. Bluebirds scattering from a pine tree at his back, shuffling off and warbling through the slipstreams without a plan. The wind roaring and waning. Some ancient rusted engine covered in moss and vines of ivy and beside it a rusted tin barrel deteriorated to nothing about the coping and all down the sides. Clover and asparagus weed growing from soil at the rusted out bottom. Ruggles passes now through a hallucinatory jungle of bright green kudzu, swatting down arcs of barbed thicket before him like thin serpents and sometimes staying thorned branches from his face and clothing with the walking stick and passing under. Crumpled beer cans in the brush, red label yellowing in the continuous sun and rain. A bleached newspaper, rainslaked a hundred times over and dried a hundred times over and the pages blank and Ruggles taps it with his staff as he passes and it disperses like a body of ash, yielding its form entirely, and rendered unrecognizable in the wind like death petals scattering greyly along across the low of the forest. Spikes of grass and ivy hunter green and blonding at the tips where it lain under the weeping vision of the sun. Honeysuckle straddles the path now fragrantly and sweetly, and he plucks a shoot and holds it to the inconsistency of his slightly crooked nose as he walks. And grief fills his child's heart to brimming. This tortured man. This sometimes cantankerous cerebrotonic who was left by all, or perhaps of fault of his own, in a crumbling world without infrastructure or direction. Like some

toad man shunned away by the fair countenanced villagers in time of panic. The community itself had been gone for months. Everyone, it seemed. Houses shuttered and windows shuttered. Menacing crucifixes and lettered warnings spraypainted in a sort of hasty griffonage on these wooden barriers. Evacuated. No one told him. He slouches forward through the forest like an apprentic druid becloaked in this aspect. Shadows cool and quivering. A million trembling circles across the forest floor translated through the canopy above. There is not mercy here. Virginia.

He has a home, though it be a destroyed one. And this the work of his own shameful hand. Propelled by madness to the act. Swarmed with notions of bodies entombed there grotesquely. Spirits suffocating and trapped therein. See him then, it is neither day nor night as the waters of the clepsydra still, and there be only the corridors and a blood-shot crazed Ruggles bounding through the darkness. See him there, wild eyed and certain, hurtling through the endarkened hallways of his home, certain, yes, certain, the tenth stair as I understand the direction. Forestock of the axe lain back across his right shoulderblade and bobbing about like a shark's fin through the black water of shadow and then fielding stray bits of star or sunlight as he passes some spared quadrangle of fenestration, orbs tunneling at his feet, glowing electric blue, zigzagging hither and thither and directing this laughing vandal lumberjack through the home bouncing along almost rabbit like and wheeling the gleaming axe in black silhouetted repetitions back over his head and swinging it with a smooth roll of his shoulders downward with all his manic strength dashing through the sunbleached greywood planking into the braincolored and mouseblacked insulation stuffed between floors. The axe before him as if a talisman directing, and he follows this wedge of steel in a sort metallomancy and blue light scribbling before the sheetrock separating rooms, and the axe flies through the scobiforming air and drywall bursts in a huge powdery constellation. The house dank with the scent of burnt tobacco and sweat and urine and years of sunwarped wood and insulant fragrantly ventilated. Some dark magick beginning at the tenth stair and Ruggles hacks exhaustedly at the descending structure reducing the number of stairs from sixteen to three. So, too, did Ruggles rip away and saw at every living wire manifest in this home. Many of them cut by Ruggles while live and burning bright white at the severing and so hot that they reforged the very blades with which they were cut, both objects destroyed forever and these implements tossed one by one hissing into the sink. Three days was all it took. Three days and he had ventilated every room of the small red brown townhouse that he and his madness had theretofore occupied in a vaguely, at least ostensibly, normal and decorated capacity, reducing it to a sort of useless moult. The same temperature as the outdoors reliably. Only darker. He has a child in this world some six years old. A daughter. Partially estranged from the father by the histrionic action of an adulterous and insane mother. The matrimonial aspect in its representative image of the historical marriage at the end of an age. Darkly he is regarded by her people. As if the most shadowed corner of the cold universe had manifested in an arguably human mode in the gauche and disagreeable person of this Ruggles Harrogate. A doctor of law. A felon. A man who could simply not abide the trading away of his days for a life of stable remuneration or company. Disgraced he was before the collapse. Seen of bloodshot eyes and wild religious fervor campaigning along the highway, conferencing with invisible leagues of assailant demon hobs and the manifest or illusory spirits of his dead. Moving toward the end through the landscape of his demented dream in a sort of perambulatory and self-elected law-enforcement capacity, enforcing imaginary crimes and finding himself charged with

and incarcerated for what were alleged to be real crimes. And so he fell in the eyes of his people, for the affection of the educated and well-heeled is a finicky thing that is no way centralized around a notion of loyalty, though it is discussed as much falsely in this capacity. No, men fall away. And when the major structures of this electromagnetically dark continent did begin their domino, men turned away from one another in a sometimes deadly scramble for resources that ceased with the evacuation of the community. Ruggles slept through it. He told himself that at any rate he could not leave the state for the conditions of his bail. The becloaked felon, a victim of false magick and a man rushed to the extremes of existence like a bird caught in a vacuum. Still did he pray. There was a night. Before everyone left. He stood in the front yard of his home, the eyes of neighbors upon him, clearly mad now. And there in the grass a sort of clutchable dark wind did meet him there, sinewy in its expression and grappling, and he was thrown once to the ground by the gust, and staggering up he was thrown again, and he stood the third time and thrashed wildly until the morning birds did murmur and the sky greyed and the yard was peaceful and the dream gone. Sand whispering through a glass tunnel. Ruggles did not read the papers during the collapse. Nor did he watch the news. Or conference with his neighbors. The night they gathered on the lawns. Dark birds in the swaying branches. Cold night. Neighbors with arms crossed on their lawns. Shied away from them, he did. Cutting away through shadow and grass. Narrow pathway. Their strange eyes gliding whitely and variegated along his path. As if for purchase of his soul itself. These twisted faces. Begone now. Dark cloak swirled in the rippling night wind. So much rain he has seen. So much rain he has passed through desperately. Falling once to where rainwater washed chugging downward in the slope of a curb and he lay soaked on the ground slaking from the very rushing pavement his thirst and hobbling back up and stumbling on through the rain. Though these be not the first cold penumbra through which he has passed. Nay. He has seen death. He has seen madness and violence and jail. Through this now ruined world, he has wandered having endured images so heinous as to curdle a man's mind forever. A deer who had run headlong into an abandoned grocery store, unintentionally embedding its antlers through the thin metallurgy of the aisle's shelving and finding itself caught there in the cool darkness, thrashing insanely and pulling the very shelving down upon itself and becoming crushed and trapped therein, still conscious. Starving. Hooves rasping wildly and half clopping over the linoleum, slamming against the countershelving. The creature's breath labored and melancholy. Brown-scleraed eyes crazed with horror and fatigue, flickering around crazily and wide in the flashlight. Smashed under the slanted shelving apparatus and giving off an incomprehenssibly profound animal musk. A decollate grinning head. And all of the sands of Golgotha swept there from the bergfall of some evil mountain. He passes along through this jungle. Vexed and lonely. The road breaking into view at the treeline and void of traffic and glittering blue like a sheet of living water. He broke at length into the road, enstaffed and sorcerer's robe billowing back behind him like some fabled archberg falling upon a town of sin, white eyed and enswirled with wind. This occasional madman. This compliant patient.

Indeed, Ruggles must take tablets everyday for the tidal control of the waters of his mind. Three separate types of medication. For all his adult life. Since he was observed by family as a young man of hardly twenty four years, gibbering insanely and found baltering in his socks along a path of a sort of fevered mystagogic quest that lead very expediently to two county jails. So, when commerce stopped. That day he found no more cashiers, or check-outs. No more pharmacist and

granular instrumental music played over the store's yellowing speakers. He had to take it upon himself to seek out this unlooted pharmacy and maintain his prescriptions through what appeared to be the apocalypse. This mantic wanderer of dimension disparate and speculative, slanting along over the windstrewn leaves and rocks at the roadside. A frog seen bounding greenly into the keylime spectra of brambles at the forest break. Narrowed eyes crazed through the air. Wet legs reeling. Droplets of waterclear piss dribbling down from the arcing creature. Disappearing into the scribbling dayglow of pale purple cornflower. Cicadas taking up with the sun falling at his back there, trundling along to the pharmacy. He was going there to meet another felon. A man with a huge head who had not seen yet in person. They were meeting to practice a sort of democratic portioning of the pharmacy's controlled substance inventory. How they arrived at this shadowy covenant, it cannot be said entirely. Through silence and intonation, though, as much as through spoken word. But conference he did with this man through a walkie talkie crackling in Ruggles pouch at this very moment, setting the fastidious birds on edge and spinning their pebble black eyes about for the source of this sad static. Things have changed, as late. Something dark and incomprehensible and deadly drifted into this region like the black moon of some unholy counterplanet. A host of starlings wing over the road above in a sort of blackfeathered avian rainbow like chittering origami. Leftward through the trees the sun sinks as if stealing into a well on the wooded western horizon.

II

He wears fine pants and they are pleated and his shirt is collared but short of sleeve and tucked in proportionally about his circumference at the waist and he notes this and notes that it need no adjustment and he is spectacled and balding and a greyblack brush of goatee he wears about his mouth and chin and his eyes behind the glasses sit like distinct and orbital insects making separate and alien considerations and there on the floor the rug is crooked almost imperceptibly and to this correction he sets himself and there finds, as well, an accumulation of lint and dander beneath the loveseat and the floorboards creak as he strains under with a towel or paper, and the bodies below do not stir and he can, in this moment, reach their fragrance though muted, and his loins move and he begins to gyrate dementedly against the floor letting high-pitch sussurations escape his harelip and the man buckles and swims and the floor does not give back nor soften and he gyrates once more like something hooved there and roaring out in murderous anger, spasms weirdly and lies prostrate with his face directly against against the translucent staining and swirls of the wooden flooring and here he remained grumbling and snorting and shifting, nose crankled, making tender noises and whining alternately. Shadow of his shadow there beneath him. And standing up suddenly, absolutely indifferent to the ejaculate in his pants, the man hunches along and brings the wet paper towel he had used on the weightless spindles of the dust and fabric and drops it in the waste basket in the kitchen. Then taking his lunch box from the refrigerator he turns and straightens his glasses and leaves the house directly. Passing out of the front door. His eyes carry separate destinies. Watch them ticker like a goat's. The man leaves the white van in the shadows of the garage. Spiderwebbing about the windows there. Smell of oil. His shifts along with his head aimed to the ground, as if by decree, and his arachnoidal eyes oscillate back and forth crazily in veiled search of the periphery. This is how he is likely to move through the world. The man enters the driver's seat of a white sedan in his driveway, shutting the

door at his side and buckling the seatbelt dutifully. He squints against the refracting windshield and starts the car and drives along the neighborhood lanes in the vaulting sunlight. Preened lawns with automated sprinklers, swaying a half dome of droplets upon the morning grass. A miniature rainbow washing back and forth there. Red orioles skipping across a well-trimmed bright green lawn. Crows on the electrical wires. Shaking their feathers out and warming in the sunlight. Eyes seen for a moment behind parted blinds. Painted stone gnomes mirthful in their small flower shrouded families. These images flicker at the edges of the man's vision as he drives and they rally not his appreciation nor his attention. For the man's eyes are in pursuit of a separate destiny. He passes out of the neighborhood onto the larger road and he will drive some time along these roads, taking the exit onto the highway. He merges carefully and begrudging into the slow distortion of California commuter traffic like the first cell of some plague passing through the wind into a crumbling metropolis.

This anelloidal creature through the limpid morning light with eyes squinnied, englassed. Purring along and slowing with the traffic absently. Relishing scenes of horror. Images incomprehensible. Scenes of desperation and gore. Of taunting and tears and sodomy. And then it as if all at once they are there with him in the warm car, the constituents of his invisible castle, and the man feels now as if finally clad in billowing furs from former nakedness. Each of their ghosts nuzzling upon his form warmly and lewdly and the man's loins stir again and he looks irritably to the clock on the dashboard and then back to the road and his lunch pail is beside him on the passenger seat and he drives along through the flickering slotted yellow light entertaining bizarre and crude notions of children's lunchboxes being opened in some abstracted classroom and all of these containing various human parts and the children wretching and crying out in his mind and the man laughs brokenly and asthmatically to himself in this moment and relishes his secret in the pit of his abdomen and a van pulling ahead and across the broken yellow line afore his vehicle has slighted him without understanding and with this insult his righteousness is incited mightily and he declares axiomatically that these creatures, taken in general, simply do not and cannot understand. That in their misuderstanding they are therefore ill equipped for existence and their conference with the material world. That being ill equipped as such are rendered dependent, not contributive. And therefore chattel. Less than that. For chattel does not so often ask of its owner. He was appointed by his own master as a manciple of sorts for the sorting out of torturous death upon this helpless populace. Therefore, wanderer or no wanderer, the man will render lost and dead forever from their former parasitic state any vagrant or child or woman of this earth he or his own master so chooses, and in so doing his invisible candescent kingdom increases. And this speculative and bloodslaked kingdom he now considers, the numbers among them milling through insane fire. He conducts a census of sorts, accounting for each of them there wandering blind and screaming in their conflagrate agony. The lowness of some creatures he finds there abhors him, but he relishes in their accumulate effect.

The man drives along behind the bonnetted head in the van before him. This chariot of insult. The man imagines to himself that it the woman's skull would crush much like a turtle shell with the right blow of a hammer and his eyes wander histrionically around the backseats of her vehicle invasively and in separate directions and the radio is silent and he grows antsy in the lurching traffic and sweat glistens along his limited brow. His scrunched and trembling pink features so indistinct zas to allow him to be superpositioned across the universe. The man

punches the radio awake on a sudden as if the circular button had insulted, as well, and the music plays and he can not hear it. He thinks of the children's classroom again and the lunchboxes and their horror. He cannot hear the song, only a thin rasping. Words without intonation. And a scene of grotesque torture from the night before enters his mind and soon he is speculating giddily behind his beady eyes on that evening's plans. He drives along and he begins to think of computers. Of making pornographies. And he thinks of the classroom again and punches the radio silent with his small soft hand and relishes his secret again in silence, in all of its dark succor, and he pulls the sedan into a large grey parking lot of an brown brick office building.

The man begins to speak aloud to himself. Small eyes wide with sickening wonder at the windshields.

And so it was him I saw wandering from room to room.Aand his wig I wore that night, that I could, that I could render him pleasant. That I did render him pleasant. All of them. And you what grow within me. Sustain me. My Lordship. But what the blonde boy said last night, he said. You will remember. His skull was cracked, for you saw the blood and watery fluid spill out yourself. The wrinkled brain. And he said, Wait. Did my mother call me to dinner? I thought I heard my mama's voice. And in that moment I felt you move within me. And between us. And I felt your member within me, as mine within him. And forgive me, but I believed that we had reached an ultimate stage of sorts and that I was therefore transformed. And I felt great pride in you for me. And forgive me, highness, if this is wrong, my king, but I felt you were proud of me. For the shared hate that moved within us for this creature talking of his mother. And then you moved within me. I understood. That the sequence began in the spirit first. That the physical modifications are underway now. But last night, in that closeness with you, my lord, I believed to have transformed in some way I cannot singularly identify. But that you chose me, Lord. And, and, and, forgive me, your highness, I know I have much work to do. I only meant to comment, and, and, and I understand, Lordship, the man says.

And quickly then he shuts the car off and takes up his lunch pail from the passenger seat and lets himself out of the sedan and while crossing the parking lot he calls forth again the image of the classroom and then of the disgusting confusion of the boy asking for his mother and how he had, how he actually had, against his own judgment, stopped and listened into the uncalling night for the voice of the boy's mother. And felt the ridiculousness of it and the unlimited murderous frustration of having allowed the boy to direct the ritual in front of his master and they all so close together there and this he is thinking as he walks in the door of the brown brick office building and nods to colleagues that look up or walk by. The man moves to his cubicle and sets down his effects. He walks his lunch pail to the break room for refrigeration, and he scans across the bobbing and yawning heads encubicled there across the grey room and he studies each haircut and made determinations on who needed to cut their hair and then, turning further, he is whelmed with nausea looking at a black female colleague. Thinking to himself dumb nigger, the dumb bitch. Cherishing his particularized hate for them, for blacks. For his master had told him that these were the wanderers of the earth least equipped, most ill equipped, and most burdensome. And his master told him that so long as they continued to take flesh they were his unquestioned possession. But the man finds them so troublesome sometimes. So reactive. And he hunches along squinted through the carpeted aisles toward his cubicle still yet thinking the dumb nigger, the dumb bitch. Hearing it as a small children's song, these phrases repeated in his head,

and as he takes his seat he imagines the black colleague's head suffering the cycle of a car tire, the skull buckling inward and the compressed cerebral innards popping with a hiss of gas through the integument of the face, and he logs in and begins to type and stare at this screen on and off for the next eights hours before leaving and he is therefore legitimized.

III

Kim sat in the boat across from him. Ruggles rubbed his temple and then his brow and looked at her for a moment and looked away again and ventured to speak.

What if it wasn't our fault, what happened. Between us.

The small boat was wooden and it sloshed and the oars creaked and entered the dust speckled water at hypnagogic angles like strobocopes. Wands among the sunlight, piercing the surface of the lake. Kim hiked her dress about the waist and sat her chin on her joined fists.

That doesn't clear the memory, and what the memories do to the dynamic and the intimacy, she said, watching him study the scatter of imponderabilia glistening wetly and drying in the sun between them upon the floorboards of the boat. A glinting serrated fish knife with a centimer calibration superscribed along the length of the tinkling argent blade. A rusted crab trap. Wild with knotted fishing line. The wind rose and pulled them leftward and both their stomaches spun inspired of danger for a moment and Ruggles scrambled for the oars as if there much to be done, and his corrections were much that of the wind waning again as the boat ceased its rocking.

She lay back on the wood at the head of the boat and she closed her eyes, and he looked to speak again and speaking, said, That's all you remember then? The fall out. He paddled and the boat slid heavily along the water like living glass and he felt the sun hot on the back of his neck and she said, It was terrible. It's more recent, isn't it?

He looked aside her and felt conscious doing so and paddled and heard and watched the water ripple out and the dark water tunneled and gulped under the oars and birds murmured liquidly about them, casting to and fro through the sunlight across the channel. Ruggles wasn't sure where he was directing them to now, as if the conversation plotted the course of the craft itself. Not did he know what could be said in response without inviting their more or less standard acrimony and recrimination. Though the sun was behind him glittering engrailed about the perimeter with orange rods of light, he squinted and looked askance and was blind and said, Yes, it's more recent, but everything has changed. Everything has changed.

Her eyes were closed to the sun as he spoke and they did not open for his words and she wore a canvas dress of blue and white stripes and she smelled of soap if you were near to her and her breath of coffee if you drew nearer to her and she let a hand fall over the side of the wooden coping and scratch lazily the drifting water and Ruggles watched and felt the cold of the water on his own hand for a moment and shivered and started to row the boat as if it were some answer to this proxied cold and she did not look troubled by the circumstances and there they sat across the boat like figures sided opposite in some unknowable equation. Or as person and counterperson. And Ruggles was troubled and so troubled he spoke, I feel like you forgot us. That we were something extraordinary and that God cut in flesh our love in the form of our daughter and how could you not feel compelled forever by that?

And she shuffled up quickly and to something constituent of attention and said, I didn't forget us, Ruggles. Just, there's just a lot that happened after that. That maybe changed how I see that forever.
Fights and such, right?
Yes, that's one of the things. The boat creaked on the water and the sunlight fractured where the thin air and water met and in fracturing spilled out like a purse of wavering gold coins and the fish checked and darted in the cold dusty chambers of light beneath them, cold cylinders flecked with river dust and mika. A blackbird swooped between them in the boat like some startling augury and it arced therefrom again into the sky and shrunk in the grapefruit light and the silent collision of clouds and swung back like a boomerang toward them in the boat. Swooping leftward some ten yards out. He looked to her now, directly.
We can never forget the arguments, can we? Like, that's the story. That's our story. Me yelling at you for infidelity.
Infidelity.
Yes, for infidelity. That's the most charitable manner in which I'll venture to describe those letters. But, right, that's it: Our alpha and our omega, me yelling at you about the letters, the carrying on.
She shook her head and spoke, It was traumatizing, Ruggles. You traumatized me.
And you, me!
The oars splashed bilaterally tangled in Ruggle's involuntary motion of protest.
She gestured wildly, as well, and the boat rocked and she said, Well then, so what? What are you pining for? We had something very short lived and then we traumatized eachother.
A cloud, ragged as it was, passed overhead and in passing it blocked the sun from Ruggles and Kim, and in blocking the sun, so, too, did it suspend all warmth therefrom and cold enveloped both of their huddling forms, pose and counterposed, and the moment seemed of gravity indeterminate and bleak and pure dread came upon Ruggles heart and he looked at the girl across from him and how they could not reckon to another or she to him he could not bear nor understand and they, too, having a child a reconcilation would be for the betterment of and in taking the oars he dipped along sadly in the waters and wound them through the rushing liquid and the boat skittered against the wind and slowed and drifted and then glode forward along and he looked toward the shore and again she said from the stern, What are you pining for?
Nothing. It just. It wasn't supposed to happen that way.
Well, that's how it happened, Ruggles.
He could have cried but he held his throat and mind and breath still through his nose and took to paddling more expertly, with more care, as if stroking the back of the river, and looking blindly to the dimpled water, disks tesselated obloidally on every windblown inch of it and how the sun seemed lean and angular now and the light bore little warmth and could not make him to squint now and so he squinted against the wind instead and looked over his right shoulder pointlessly. Ruggles felt a sort of comprehensive weakness wash through him and he narrowed his eyes at birds alit on the water further off, bobbing among the fluid and frantically sweeping themselves up again into the sky with a splash. He leaned back in the bow and locked his feet in to the middle slat and pushed against this with the soles of his shoes and he began to paddle them

directly toward the shore. Silence hung between them now for sometime immeasurable in the experience of it and she said, What, are you going back now?
I don't see what all - it's getting dark out.
You're sad.
I'm not.
I don't want to make you sad.
Everything is sad, Ruggles said, as the boat skid weirdly, taking the sloping mud and rocks of the shore under the fiberglass crafted bottom and water spiders skittered about and already you could see crickets and frogs bobbling about greenly preparing to take up in song at sunfall as if they moved through some gnomic fantasy, and there was a smell of woodsmoke faint there where the earth met the water and Ruggles put the oars up and rolled his pants to his knees, looking away deathdread anesthetitized, and gently he lifted himself up to straddling the gunwale and he spellunked overboard into the shallow waters cool and mysterious and rippling with netted penumbra, and taking the slack line at the fore he leant back in the sucking deposits of clay and stone and mineral and pulled the boat closer to the shore and the water lapped like heavy quicksilver against the sides of the vessel, sound like hands clapped lazily, and when the water rose up a final time he staggered back on the shore, heels dug, and pulled the line taut where it held knotted from the front transom doubler, and Kim turned to watch without expression, and the boat came sliding closer weightily and smooth and the rocks clittered again beneath the hull and Ruggles helped Kim disembark and she noted something alien and forgone in his dark eyes and he avoided her eyes, and as she stood on the shore she flattened her dress and her flaxen hair as Ruggles pulled the entire body of the boat upon the sandy wash there and ran the dripping nylon line about the gnarled and convulving trunk of a Japanese maple where the forest broke meeting the water. A woodpecker eyed him from the side of a hickory in a dying light. Enormous lizards of dayglow yellow and green ran rowing and grumpy from the mudslope at the bank into the bright kudzu garlanding the forest's edge.
Into the woods together Ruggles and Kim went trundling a melancholy duo. Few words between them and dark nigh and they move through the penumbral inversions of trees arching before them all clithridiate and striated. The sun thick and pink dragged heavily downward across the horizon in a darkling peach aspect, and the air grew colder now passing single file through the orderly and serried rows of cypress and maple and hickory. As if candidates walking through some sort of catechistic ritual they moved with silent care and near blind now through the greying woods, fording fallen trunks of beechwood and hickory, wild roots and barbs, and the forest smells thickly of woodsmoke now, and cold has fallen as such to where each can see now their breath clearer than the very path before them and what could this mean, and Ruggles hands his sweatshirt backwardly without a word to Kim over his shoulder and they pause as she wriggles into and stands there like a Christmas child posing beneath the branches. Poses smiling as if immune to his grievous heart and with her hands invisible up the sleeve, pain screams through the wooded tunnels like wind and it drives their teeth to chattering and their footing quickens in the settling twilight and they break at length through a kudzu jungle of clover and honeysuckle and poison ivy into the creaking gravel parking lot. Birds and katydids digital in transposed circumferent chatter. And into Ruggles car they tumble, these broken figurines, and he produces a crumpled cigarette from a crumpled pack before buckling himself in and lights it

with a match and the match he tosses out the window into the gravel as the car sways jostling and crackling along out of the gravel lot and Kim asks or states, You're smoking, and Ruggles shrugs and Kim rolls her eyes and crosses her legs toward the passenger door and the song of their daughter played through his blood and when they swam and made her did she then take all of that love or is she the culminate of everything we shared in that month.

And a month or not, this pair was married within one and did produce among them a child in the womb of Kim in that month, as well, and verily, the Lord said that any man who sends away his wife his in a perpetual state of adultery without fornication was also giving himself to sin, but the letters were something more. Of the child's wombly death she had spoken secretly with another man. Of absconding. Of accepting gift from the man for the death of the child. Of her love for him. And Ruggles puts the cigarette out the window about two-thirds through it and tries to sip from an empty soda in the center console and sets the weightless can back down dumbly and self-conscious, and the heater is on and the car is warming and Kim is folded up still inside his sweatshirt as if waiting in a gown for surgery. Looking out the window with and without thought and Ruggles says, There was a time, believe it or not, that you wanted me and only me, forever.

Kim sits upright and pushes her dress down with her smocked hands.

I loved you.

We were married, Kim.

She rearranged herself in the seat and shook her hands out of her sleeves and said, I remember. The divorce was about as long as the marriage, right?

He turned the headlights and the swung across the road and the hills passed on their sides and they looked endless and like the weird bulbous expressions of green furred animals, the contours of some huge beast of field, and these fields fenced with wood and stone. Ruggles spoke.

I think when you make those vows, that divorce doesn't dissolve them. That you're, that we're always, at least, unconsciously in the pursuit of those vows or some inversion of them. I think divorce, and - yes, I remember it - does not create a division or dissolution of vows. I believe it just creates a sort of convolution, an imaginary construct of distinct, mediated lives.

That's - that's.

I just mean that I think we're chained to eachother. That either way we are in service of those vcws, if they sacred.

We didn't marry in a church, Ruggles.

How often are you making vows in daily life, Kim Looking at another person in the eyes, repeating vows that attach to eternity. I've only done that once, as far as I remember.

She made herself comfortable in the seat. She looked out the windscreen at the rural evening and she could feel in her blood the scent of the maples and of wood that splinters and of dew on the evening grass.

They're just words, she said weakly. You just don't want them to be.

The night whirred past them on both sides and the moon hung strange in the sky and it waxed gibbous and hanging there white above them a circle in the windscreen beyond rows of corn and honeysuckle and mailboxes, broken down abandon buildings and houses. Ruggles knit both hands on the wheel slightly and dropped his left arm again to the arm rest and he glanced over and saw her there huddled in his sweatshirt still, legs indian style in the passenger seat and her smell he smelled and glanced the side of her face again and he could for a moment see her large

dark eyes and the demented curiosity held therein and his heart sank like some planet lost in the stretches of space sundered from its galaxy and the scenery that shuttled past her silhouette was all swarms of dark blue and black and grey and then flickering lights and he asked her if she reckoned him a good father and she said she did and blackbirds lit off a fence they had aligned upon and took cover as they passed and accellerated and she put her hand out on Ruggle's knee and tapped it twice and said, Let's just see how things go, okay, I don't wan't to talk about this stuff anymore.

IV

The authority within him spoke and he when he spake he said my reward I speak to thee as a child alone in a field without a cloth to cover from the winds nor a mother's bosom from which to suckle or savor warmth and having found you my reward your form wretched to begin with and helpless, what will did you carry within you before me, my reward, for whose will did you obey or had you any will at all or were you just a child naked in a field and to thee I've shown that to labor for the correct master is to labor loved, my child, and all of them have been beautiful, everyone of our kingdom, and did I not stand on high against the heavens and with thunder clapping in the distance behind me and washed in the purple of lightning and pestilential rain, did I not dare God directly, were you not shewn the shadows of your understanding and were they not alit bright upon our introduction and to me you adhered, yes, and I will show you what I will make of thee through the performance of these actions, the transformation representing a covenant in the flesh and when we become one you are able to hold me, my child. You have understanding now. Some but you knew not that you were the very child born. The child saved from the wilderness and rendered an agent and manciple thereof. Now, this one before us. Where is his Jesus to save him? Allegedly Jesus is standing beside him in this very room. I would suppose, according to the parable, that Jesus would be in fact carrying this boy in this moment considering the gravity of the consequences coming down upon him. And yet Jesus will not reveal himself even for a moment through that curtain to release our subject. And a young boy, though he a nigger and he crying for Jesus by name as well, and where is He and I ask you again, my child, if it was not me who stood shouting upon that mountaintop between a collapsing sky and slanting rain and fulgural light, shout for him to stand me down then and there, and all this I have shown to you, my reward, and here again He is absent. Though He or God of the Old Testament, who could it was supposed able to move mountains without effort expended and yet neither, nor the Holy Spirit, will stop our hearts to save this child, or even release this child from the limits of his bondage. And it is there you might see, my reward, that this absence is a sort of silent testimony that the child, and his forebearers, necessarily and through principle, belong to our kingdom. For without it, the child belongs to nothing. Repeating a name and his fate is absolute, and I will tell you there was a moment, my child, that I felt the Other in the room for a moment last night. When we were inside the boy and we spent ourselves when I thought of the Other standing there watching us inside of this boy. Did you feel it, my reward? And recalling this, the man is overcome with dark impulse, and he takes the child by the blindfold as one might a wild horse by the bit and bridle and swings the boys head downward toward his lap. The boy buckling to his knees and showing his broken teeth and begging again, and then, they all three, buckle and the boy cries for his mother throughout and vomits and pants and the man spends himself again and hits the boy several times in the face immediately

thereafter with his small pink closed fist calling him a fucking faggot and telling him to not look at him or he'll kill him dead where he sits now, his perverted ass, and heisting up his overalls it is then decided to bind the boy's arms separately upon a board and his legs likewise and to lock him away and return later to understand more what role he will serve, and it being a nigger how could he ever understand. For he is like a child found naked in the wilderness and a destiny now forever he has been given, and the doorbell rings and suddenly everything is shifting like electric sand inside of him and his master instructs him and he listens beady-eyed and grinning at nothing and he changes out of his overalls quickly, for these he wore for ritual alone, and he put on a pair of athletic shorts and a tee shirt that said, Time Flies In Wyoming, and he slid on socked feet into the bathroom and set his glasses over his eyes and checked his face and hands for spatter and the door was still unlocked to the chapel and again the doorbell rings and rage sweeps through him for they have now touched his property three times and anything more cannot be solved by argument or words alone, and he opens the door and the investigators nod and wave and then show him some pictures from the porch and the man looks at them and thinks of the contorted faces and writhing bodies in the crawl space beneath the front room and he shakes his head no and puts his hand on his hip and asks the officers again what he should do if he sees sign of them and he says, yes siree, and the investigators chuckle and he feels pleased and they feel pleased with themselves and the man thinks of them dead as they stand in front of him now and how inferior they are that one of these very children is alive right now within this very home and he calls to mind an image of all of their bodies rotting and this raises his loins with unexpected vigor and he wishes them off into the neighborhood streets and watching them walk away, he thinks of degrading them and that one day they, too, will be his and he corrects himself quickly and says ours, and the night hangs distant in a sort of distortion of light he cannot see and he throws the lock on the door and returns to the hallway bathroom where he studies his face in the mirror and his hands and he turns his body and lifts his shirt and turns and looks over his shoulder at the accumulation of flesh in the small of his back and he is well pleased with the progess and he passes his hand over the nub of skin there and he thanks his master for this modification and he gushes to his master that the metamorphosis is real and their covenant will be made flesh and that walking this earth he is this agreement rendered in reptilian integument. And wings will sprout from his back someday if the sequence is adhered to, and the moonlight hangs at the edge of the porch criminally and weird and it presses upon the blinded panes and soon the man is back down the stairs and through the first door into the chapel entrance where decollate heads and various arrangements of flesh, appendage, organ, and bone stand in monstrous reimaginings, reeking and transforming and shriveling. And the man passes into the chamber at the end of the hall and the boy's head swings back up and he says, Please, sir, and the man, as if taking two objects from a shelf simultaneously with both arms, walks up to the boy and tears the colloidal spheres of eyeballs blind from boy's head and the boy screams and loses consciousness and into outer darkness he floats and floating back he awakes into terror as if the loss of his sight constituted a full paralysis of his being and he can feel the man doing something sharp to his private parts and the man is speaking to himself and then at times screaming wildly into the boy's eyeless face and the boy feels but does not understand his brokenness and his hands bound he feels the optic nerves wet blue and pulsing on his cheekbones, and suddenly he is sucked away as if through a tunnel and there is distant yelling and confusion and the boy

cannot feel his eyes, nor his aching loins anymore, and toward a great roar he is sucked through this vacuum and in being brought such he is lost to himself and his name is remote and his spirit bright and it is light again.

The man looked like some odd cryptobenthic fish as he was arranging the boy's body for the offering and the overalls he wore were made of leather and he did not speak as he took the small corpse and castrated it and these parts he placed in his own mouth as he had the boy's eyes and soon he lie prostrate over the eyeless black boy muttering and chewing, lacing the boy's arms through the shoulder straps of his overalls and pressing his own face wildly into the boy's the sweat on them coruscating and the man staring into the pink clenched ocular muscles therein and yelling wildly into the boy's mouth so to fill his lungs, and in screaming so he spent himself and his master, too, now lay upon the table with them and the boy though a nigger was delivered into their kingdom and at no point did anything in the universe intervene in the boy's fate and pauses were given explicitly for it to to do so and this being the case the boy was integrated and already he could feel the boy's eyes brightening his own vision and his master agreed as much and the room is cramped and bloodspattered and it smells where the boy shat his pants and where he was violated and it smells metallic and it smells of sweat and there are bones everywhere and candlewax in fragile clustered stalactites from the tables therein all equipped with some manner of chain or bind and he lay face down on the child a moment longer before standing up very swiftly and screaming again into the boy's mouth from a position leaning over him and the boy's mouth fills very quickly and his voice is sent back to him and so he moves swiftly out of the chapel through the entrance and across the basement to where his hardware is kept and the man produced a power drill from a zipped nylon case and returned to the chapel where he tested the trigger of the drill and satisfied with the revolutions and response, the man drills into the boys chest through the breast bone, into each of his lungs, a triangle of holes on each side, and then setting the drill beside the boy he screams in through the mouth again, sealing with his hands the fleshy aperture, and the man hears his voice gurgling mutely out of the boy's chest and the holes suck weirdly but no resistance in the mouth is thereagain found and through him the man screams again and then begins to breathe in through the collapsing lungs and his master is pleased with this and so through these apertures in the boy's claimed corpus does he dare God to intervene in the building of their kingdom and the room is silent and again he shouts it and he can feel the Authority speaking through him, through them, and the room is dark and red and it is silent between these suctioned bloodmisted breaths and the man covers the holes in the boys chest with his hands and tries to scream through the boy's eye sockets instead and he pictures himself on a rock ledge in a rainstorm, lightning antic and wild, purple and warping, and wind pulling the rain slant and pulling, too, his voice across the heavens.

V

When he woke that freezing morning, the morning that he thought everyone vanished, Ruggles had already dismantled his home. He lay in bed for sometime, blinking and shifting in the nightsweat dampened swirl of yellow honeycomb patterned sheets. Studying the subtle movements of the sun outline the perimeter of the fenestration and warping frenetically in the swaying folds of curtain, whereupon small vicious faces emerged on the trembling brown suede and menaced the crazed viewer with wordless oaths. Recondite mantic solar illustrations.

Hieroglyphs. All auguries of evil. All of them. Wrens could be heard trilling and ticking somewhere beyond the window. He could see his breath in the air above the bed. Ruggles clenched his muscles in the morning cold and he lay in the bed studying these expressions of light on the curtain with a sort of moth's devotion and divining from them he groaned out from his hibernacle there like some manner of bear. The tangled sheets. Eyes crazed with madness. He breathed deeply through his nose. Clogged. Partially. Ruggles put a finger to his right nostril from his prostrate position and sealed it shut and thooked a mist of snot upward into the freezing air like a whale spuming. The room smelled of pipe tobacco and sunwarmed fiberglass insulation. Dust flecked in the slanted shafts of light and Ruggles rolled away toward the wall, in a sort of forestalling effort, contemplating the symbols and wraiths he had watched dance mutely on the dustcloaked curtain. The lineal goblins of Sodom and Gomhorrah. Everything is sin. Ruggles shut his eyes tight, squinnying the lids together, and he drifted into a sort of bloodpink orbital room within himself where there was not day yet. And it was from this unwilling vantage that Ruggles heard three blasts thrump mutedly across the sky outside, far off and rumbling, and three waves of warm light did subsequently pass in dragging cinnabar waves across his closed eyelids. He opened a single eye in quivering bloodshot glissade and studied the lemon hues of the drowsy bedroom. Wondering. A spiderweb glistening in the northeastern corner. Empty cans of soda all scattered about the floor. Jacket hung from the quarterpost. He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes, and he gazed blinking upon the slowly whooping ceiling fan revolving woodenly above his bed move the freezing air. He did not remember turning it on. Exhaustion was ringing through his person like some enormous vibrating bell and his bones ached neuropathically and his mind reeled unmedicated and loosed through the soft passage of scobiform light and levitations of dust. There was a cheap plywood table beside the bed upon which his tablets were rowed in translucent orange bottles. A lukewarm half-drunk cream soda. He sat up, blinking. Medicine. Compacted powders, that they might stay madness and an unwieldy attention. Poisons these. All of them. Ruggles shaped shadow on the western wall. Sunlight flaxen. Fluid and golden. Freezing.

The walls of the bedroom were painted a sort of bonecolored grey and they were entirely bare save a framed doctoral degree which Ruggles had labored for and the wood enpaneled scroll there englassed upon the southern wall represented the absolute and total living culminate of these labors. The mahogany paneling of the frame was broken at the bottom left side from having fell from the wall. Ruggles studied this for a moment and gave himself to watching light and shadow, yellow and grey, collogue as if between themselves thereupon the walls, and he wondered at the day as if it were something to be believed in or not. A sort of animate tableaued thesis. As if the distant thrum of industry, the rushing murmur of sparrows and goldfinches, the limpid sunlight nosing along the fenestration and spilling varial obloidal hoops of yellow on the floor through holes in the knit of the curtain, and the waiting day were a kind of shapeless credenda of sound and warmth and color swirling about the collapsar within which Ruggles was born and through which he was constantly hurtling. He slips out of the tidal mess of blankets. The cold-shanked curglaff of the waking day.

Behold him. Huddled form through the freezing home. Blanket about his shoulders and cowling his head like a weathered and resurrected Saint. The furnace and water heater out. He slouches along, bleary eyed through the ruins. Winter socks. One of blue and the other grey. Ruggles

comes to the top of what remains of the stairs and the cold rises from the lower floor like applause and he goes slumping down the three remaining stairs. Holding the blanket over his tortured form. Clenched fists and a violent oath. Behold him now grumbling as he descends the final stair and takes the landing in his socks, stepping with caution over senseless shapes of drywall and pried wooden planking strewn across the lower floor. He tip-toed, grieved and freezing, into the combination bathroom laundry room and he started the dryer and made his way squinting into the cold sunlight of the kitchen. Ruggles stood huddled in his jaundiced rags, like a man at the edge of the universe awaiting God. He looked through the splattered window at the Japanese maple that curled up out of his small quadrangular yard in red boughed arterial expression and he studied the foxfire green ivy garlanding the base and trunk, and he looked to the fence and stood calculating there before the sink with a cocked eye the neighbors which, if any neighbords, could potentially see him there, and he was satisfied with the results. He rolled a cigarette and sprinkled a few mossy bits of cannabis into the tobacco and he spun this tubular with a flourishing lick and he slummocked through the afternoon light back to the dryer, where he sloughed off his ragged cowl and stretched a still warm blue tracksuit with red striping over his form there in the laundry room. He returned to the kitchen, already shivering. There was a glass bottle of thick black coffee on the wood laminate counter and the surface of it had frozen over from the house's temperature. Ruggles took the bottle and tipped it into a glass, nigh frosted in the cupboard, and added a few ounces of purified water to the glass. He stirred the solution and tapped the spoon on the glass coping and it clinked away innocuously into nothing but further cold and it was in this moment he felt them upon him. The cameras and the implants.

No one was outside. Two cars. But no soul did he see set upon a porch or milling about or driving boredly along through the neighborhood. Teeth chattering mechanically and ticking insanely in his head. Standing there, it was as if all at once Ruggles understood himself entirely alone there. Standing in his driveway in the navy blue tracksuit like some failed initiate slept through the rapture. Looking about panicked in the cold and seeing his own car gone, as well. And yet still eyes gaze upon him. They cast their vision out like a waterlogged net and slicks across his nervous system with sickening reprise. The lineal goblins of Sodom and Gomhorra. Skin mucoidally colored. Eyes mismatched and inspired by perversion. Brown-matted pink tongues lolling. Freckled like a dog's tongue. Jersied. Ruggles walked to the edge of the driveway and he looked up and down the thoroughfare. Everyone was gone. He fished out the half bent cigarette and struck a match in cupped hands away from the wind and brought the tenuous flamule, nigh invisible, up to the cigarette. Standing in the middle of the lane. It was then they looked out at him from their windows. Through blinds parted and gently whispering. And soon he was moving door to door. Knocking and praying at each door in a solemn half-bow with hands clasped before his abdomen priest or magus like. Signing the cross with a swipe of fingers on the closed doors before he swept away.

In the biting cold Ruggles wasn't sure what this absence of his neighbors meant, or by what laws or bylaws he was hereby bound, having now been left or perhaps transported to some alternate or purgatorial reality occupied potentially by himself and projections of himself alone. A garden of flowers frozen englassed in ice like tinkling crystaline sculptures. A stone bunny with blind eyes at this door. Two of them. A wreath of synthetic conifer and holly flourished about with faux knots of folded red ribbon. To make a gift of nature. At each door the same silence. Water frozen

at the top in the clay colored flowerpots. Knock knock. And Ruggles is freezing now, pulling his hands into his sleeves, and becoming aware that having cut the heat out, to spite of their installations or not, has become unsustainable and that without additional resources or help his main activity would almost necessarily have to consist of little but huddling before the fire with blankets clutched about him. Prying up and burning every slat of the cursed tree from which his floor was cut and wooded. The night before last he had placed riverstones in the fire to help it burn longer and an hour after lighting the fire, while pissing with the blankets up about his neck, he heard these stones explode and come hurtling out of the flames with no indication prior, and he looked to the right from urinating to see these glowing orange spheroids shoot insanely and meteoric across the dark room, slamming into the far wall and leaving the drywall smoking at contact. A foot from shattering the sliding glass door. Gnawing cold and dark would do him in. And very little left of Ruggles from which to gnaw, so long had he wandered mad at this point. He felt this keenly in the structure and materials of his being. Dissolving away in the wild and sunless days through the frost as if hounded to the end of the steaming world by an icedrake. The nights already horrific in the house. Ghastly. A sort of endless private contest against the darkness and the cold. Pitch black and a floor blindly cluttered with demolished pieces of the house. Boards still bearing nails so rusted that the fire light cannot find them. Flames licking blindly at the screen and fluttering about sliding like a dragon in a cage of chainmail. Wraiths everywhere. Swarming and sharp and their eyes like insects. Without body and sourced from the vapors of hell itself. Bent like some old backlit ragpicker at the hearth cowled in blankets. The arc of his nobby spine nearest the whisping flames the only warmed part of his person. And it not even yet December. This frigid cold that the fire crackles dumbly. Away into the recesses of my mortified spirit. Like neurotoxins passing through the blood brain barrier. Thoughts like pea green poison gas seeping out and fogging all reason. The fundament of spirit mortified, though. And, behold, as Ruggle's deranged mind flickers away with mystical notions that perhaps reaching out to a neighbor might very well be the critical step in whatever theological cosmoplastic process that he himself has gotten entangled in again this time, and must therefore carry out so as to access once more the repugnant but ultimately well-heated and populate world he had heretofore known and loathed in spite of the conscious insult to God.

Watch again now as he sweeps along door to door, doing business in his tracksuit, knotting his rigidly seized arms over his chest. The wind like some kind of invisible avalanche upon him, and the sky huge with light, with the sun itself doing little more than ensuring the proper lighting of the hypothermia and exhaustion settling into the soft of his clattering skeleton. Behold him again, hair crazed in the wind in both color and shape. Working his way over the unresponsive static colored pavement back towards his Potemkin shell of a house. Blowing into his hands with cheeks blushing hard with crimson blood. Steam escaping through the barred slits in his fingers as if expressed from a window unit. Behold him, at the doorstep of sin, goodness huge in his heart. He scans the two cars left behind. And though he can feel the sliding and constant recalibration of their cameras upon him, he's certain the attached viewer live outside of his region and have gone, as well, to some remote location from which to view his travails. He looks the skyline, swarmed with God. Or something posing at him. Alternating, these.

The treeline is scorched. The sky metallic blue. Ruggles spins about wildly on the corruscating Clair de Lune pavement, his eyes rolling about dementedly through the weather for some

incomprehensible instruction from the winds or these kind spectres now aside him. And, behold, he tumbles sinward down the slanted row of empty driveways with hands numb and cracked all about the knuckle with razorlike slits from the freezing weather. Two cars here. Ruggles determined, through a fairly expeditious manic calculation, that if the car was unlocked, God left it for him. And not even that Ruggles is necessarily taking possession of it. But borrowing it for the seeking out of provision and warmth and this alone. And he clasped the cold metal of the handle of the second car and it yielded and he thanked God profusely and sat in the driver's seat and the wind whined across the hood and whirred against the sides of the car and it was only a bit warmer than the house inside the car, in fact, and Ruggles reclined in the seat and, in his reclining, found a spare key, and in that moment Ruggles thanked Jesus by name and title. He slid the key into eyelid slot of the starter and the engine clicked and stayed and turned over and the car whooped to life, humming beneath him, warming. And he could, aye, feel Jesus in the passenger seat. Whatever that meant. Ghosts whirring all about them and Christ gesturing wildly in gnostic spellcast at pursuing hobgoblins and goetic pseudo-children with pupilless eyes and raised without conscience and this collison of cosmologies and horrors like some kind of intergalactic charting where the only certainty is that death is the center of the universe. And may this be the whole of the law.

Ruggles tapped the dial and the radio kicked on, playing as he conscientiously backed the car out of the spot, and he felt cool and confident as he set out to see study the treeline, scorched as it looked. If it was the blasts from that morning in fact that did it. And he thanked God again for the transportation and passed along driving and pulled onto the service road where still the figments of older automobiles sped along unaccountably, perhaps in patterns, and if their cameras still upon him their watchers must have fled. Ruggles pulls into the filling station and enters and prays while entering and he knows he has twelve dollars exactly to spend that day at this point and he goes to the back of the store to the drink cooler and buys two pineapple sodas and a cheese danish, and the attendant shakes his head watching Ruggles leave and he has three dollars and some change left at this point. But he has transport now and so he drives back to his home, because he left his tobacco pouch there and so he pulls into the neighborhood and passes along in wonder and parks the car and leaves the key on the dash and jogs up the blacktop, his breath forming in the air, and Ruggles slants in through the fence and the sliding glass backdoor and soon is distracted. Wielding a full length hickory axe and ventilating his dining room wall. Soon an intercom from the street is repeating his name and ordering him to exit the house through his backdoor and he listens to this uncertainly, as if the entire interaction were optionalk, and he sits thrumming with uncertainty and rolls a cigarette and he is conscious of his movements as he does so, they are repeating the command, and he sips from the pineapple soda and on a sudden there is a loud whurring grazing the side of the house and falling away in sound, nearing the window of his bedroom like a huge moth new to flight, and a moment later a clatter of explosions within the fencing and he understands that for this particular test he must indeed go outside and in going the officers shout in violent oath, overlapping and adrenal, and they aim their guns at him and Ruggles looks down as three red orbs dance about his torso and he holds his hands above his head against the yelling and the lights in his eyes and the armory and swiftly and roughly they take hold of this bewildered mystic hobbit and put him into handcuffs and convey him like an unbreakable parcel into a grey plastic backseat with no seatbelt, and he asks

What's happening, Sir, and the sir shutting the door of this police cruiser says he's being arrested for robbery first degree and theft of a motor vehicle and Ruggles wonders where they are really going and what is actually happening at the house right now, or if he's being taken directly to center of the universe from here, and the neighborhood flies away out of the cruiser window and the scenery becomes unfamiliar outside as the sun falls heavily into the cold horizon and a great emptiness falls upon Ruggle's soul as if the sorrow and incomprehensible kaleidoscope of the living world was too wretched to even look upon. The material world is an illusion, the shaman says, in some dark clicking tongue and he is daubed with white paint like a skeleton and his words are spaced slowly and croaking a frog falls from his mouth in omen onto the warm mud floor.

VI

The head of the officer bobbed in the darkness and his elongated countenance recalled a something like a pink crocodile. Eyes heavily bagged. The cruiser purred along through the twilight and it took a service road and glode along for some time, sloping onto the highway's exit. Curving up the winding onboard, Ruggles was pulled hither and thither across the seesawing backseat in his handcuffs like the bubble in a spirit level, his weight something almost independent of himself. He was pulled back toward the window and he closed his eyes and began to pray and, upon finishing and opening his eyes, the officer's alligator glance swiveled in their bored sockets to meet Ruggle's crazed and grey lit eyes in the rearview mirror through some elongation of consciousness perhaps, and the officer shook his head looking away and he put a finger to the hand-held radio on his chest and lowered his chin and said something inaudible into it and looked back to the road. Ruggles shifted his gaze to the flickering and antic scenery shuttling by in darkling metamorphosis. The glass of the window was cool upon his fevered brain and the horrors rushing by were presented to him, each in their repugnance, as if through the fogged pane of some ragged tabernacle. The cruiser smelled of disinfectant. Ruggles looked at the back of the officer's head. The bristled and folded skin gathered at the back of his neck. The sun was pulled down in unseen assault and dark ran out tunneling across the rural town like a torrent of black ink flooding. And behold, Ruggles looked curiously to the officer's bored and perpetually disappointed eyes in the rearview mirror and he cleared his throat weirdly and the officer's eyes flicked to meet his and he spoke.

Sir? He asked.

The officer's red-rimmed eyes glode slackly in the twilight to meet Ruggle's in the mirror.

Where are you taking me, sir?

One of the officer's eyes narrowed skeptically.

What? He said.

Ruggles scooted himself across the backseat, arms bound behind as if praying invertedly, and he leaned closer to the aperture in the plastic divider that separated his uncivilized quarters from the officer's and he hearkened the man again.

Where are we going, sir?

Where are we going. The officer said, as if testing the statement itself for durability and sense. Staring ahead at the road as if it was not there. Ruggles lit up amicably from the backseat at this repetition.

Yes, sir.

The officer's eyes rolled weirdly around in the rearview mirror and he studied Ruggles again. He looked back to the road.
Well, you and me aren't going anywhere together, he said.
Sir?
You said, we. We. We have separate ultimate destinations. You and I. The officer nodded a moment later in the darkness of the frontseat as if to confirm again the truth of this statement to himself.
Uh. Yes, sir.
Ruggles watched the rearview mirror and the officer's eyes were lost on the road afore them. He studied the bloated and fleshy countenance there. The compacted horizontalization of the man's features.
Sir?
The officer's eyes rolled boredly again to Ruggles in the mirror. The officer put his hand on the radio on his chest and said a few words and numbers into it. He looked at Ruggles through the rearview mirror to indicate he was once again in a condition to perhaps answer a question. Ruggles leaned forward again, almost enthusiastically, putting his head nigh through the aperture between them, arms behind him, movements warped and precarious as the cruiser jostled along.
Sir? He said.
The officer nodded boredly in the rearview to indicate to Ruggles that he could proceed.
Where am I going?
Where are you going?
Where am I going, sir? Ruggles rephrased again amicably.
The officer turned his head slightly and saw Ruggles benign and insane face there resting on the divider weirdly parallel with his own. He looked back at the road, and Ruggles asked where he was going again and, turning his head as a cow might, the officer looked Ruggles directly in his searching left eye and said, Jail, and then shouted, Set back in that seat right now, loudly, and rolled his eyes back at the road afore them insanely and disgruntled and Ruggles at once did as he was told, extracting his head from the divider and scuffing his ears roughly on the way out of the plastic slot. Shifting along the backseat fortwith, almost demonstratively, and doing a little final hop-sit shift back toward the door. Starlight now apprehensive and grey stippled across the blacking sky. Ruggles leant against the window and watched the lights on the highway telephone poles and how they would trace together elliptically and swirl above him in yellow white knotting formations like pulled sugar or white scribbling or dandelions releasing their seeds, and the moon was now presiding in full in the sky in whitened bloat like something wan and womanly. Ruggles gazed upon this pockmarked maiden of light there pale lit and spherical, wandering in a blush of white glow across the granite sky. And he beseeched this moon. This ragpicker. This disgraced magus. He beseeched the bulbous milkiness of the moon as a sort of proxied Madonna. The cruiser dragged along the highway, and Ruggles could not make out their position. They sped along and passed screaming into the bright-lit and arching tesselation of a freeway tunnel and both Ruggle's and the officer's forms were suddenly and grotesquely alit in a lurid urine colored light and each man secretly studied the other in the shuttling flourescence. Timed against the other's glance. The cruiser's engine and reeling tires sounded heavily back to them from the cream white tiled curvature of the tunnel and soon the night sky veered above

them again as if they had passed into the fanned wings of some huge buzzard and the cruiser slid down the grey highway swaddled in moonlight and Ruggles closed his eyes and let his weight shift as it would. He tried to pull his wrist from the cuff from behind, just to see if he could, and the siren came on in that very moment and fear washed through him in a deranged cold wave, the cuffs were alarmed, and Ruggles looked up terrified and the officer was unexpectedly not attending to him in the slightest. Instead, speaking into the radio on his chest and accelerating and then taking a separate radio with a pig-tailed cord from the dash, he spoke into that. There was a maroon van with woodpaneling down the sides swerving crazily in front of the wailing cruiser. With his right arm the officer reached to the dash and gently flicked a button and the blood light swirled out above them cobalt and crimson, and it curved down into the car flickering and crazed and their respective motions looked stroboscopic and discretely sequenced, as if materializing and immaterializing in the slow shutter speed of vermilion flashing light. The officer accelerated a ticking of light later with such assertion that Ruggles was pulled against the backseat with such force as to feel himself lifted from the scoop of the backseat itself. The maroon van continued on in front of the cruiser through a farrago of light and sound with a sort of berserk determination. Swerving wildly and suddenly, passing cars on the left and on the right. Tires nearly leaving the ground with these sudden huge swings of the wheel. Pulling into the emergency lane and passing alongside traffic. The officer is seen speaking again into the bodyworn radio. His chin to his chest. Eyes bored and disappointed. Ruggles watched as the officer shot his right arm forward and flicked a few switches and took the pig-tailed radio from the dash and spoke to the fleeing suspect through the cruiser's intercom. Ninety mile an hour winds separating the vehicles and the voice carrying through the noise and thrumming air robotically and two-dimensional. If God would hound men so in their flesh. Cold grey light. The agitate red of the lightbar launching forward through the roaring sirens like a roiling host of digital cardinals. Ruggles narrows his eyes in this cascading action and entertains a notion that perhaps the individual driving this van, having now committed an incomparably worse crime, could replace his legal position. As if his arrest was a matter of non-pluralised quote, and with this ridiculous thought reaching full articulation in his mind, in that selfsame moment, he is very suddenly pulled across the entire lenght of the backseat and abruptly thrown, still in his seated position, with his arms bound behind him, defenseless to the floor of the backseat as the officer swerves to a stop and is out of the vehicle at once. His service pistol drawn. Wild light splashing everywhere. Smoke from the crumpled van. Ruggles heaved himself back upon the seat in time to see this deranged driver weakly exit his destroyed vehicle and for a moment this man's countenace is frozen in a swirl of lights and superscribed into the glaring eyeballs of commuters. The water of life stilled for this and never for love. This man's protesting rat face held there outside of time in a roadside portrait of degeneracy and absolute pandemonium. Ruggles watched as this murine and sweat glistening visage was overtaken by the officer with amazement in the little man's beady eyes and the officer pushed this face against the pavement and Ruggles watched while it mutely protested or plead. Be there any fundamental difference in these to be found in ultimate circumstances. Cars whining by their twisting forms there on the road. The officer straddled across the man's legs and binding his wrists. Ruggles sat in the red washing light like a man awaiting a worthwhile confessor from hell.

Four more cruisers arrive almost immediately and all might as well be frenetic expressions of light and siren and these alone. Uniform men through the shadows and sound. Ruggles looked to his left and saw that the traffic was slowing to better view this scene at a speed nigh close to a full stop and the cars lurched forwardly irrationally, beeping and checking along like a malfunctioning merry-go-round. The carnival lights. The whorehouse lights. The blue washed away in its waveform by the red. Every officer arriving on the scene stops at the first cruiser and asks Ruggles what he was doing there and Ruggles shrugged to each and said simply that this, gesturing with his shoulders and head at the larger scene, was someone else's thing and so he sat slumped in the backseat. Watching in fits of boredom as they detain this rat man on the side of the highway and question him mutedly, standing him next to the van, an officer at his side holding the cuffs. The police begin searching the van and they produce something in a light so white as to render the discovery invisible to Ruggles and suddenly they are ushering this disgruntled repugnant man away from his vehicle, along the shoulder, two officer, and Ruggles looks out the windscreen and he watches the stars wheeling coldly above them against the red wash and he wonders what they found in the car and not a moment later the opposite passenger door of the cruiser's backseat is thrown open and two officers are wrestling this leptosomal sweat soaked creature, with a rat or a mole's countenance. Swollen eye and thin moustache. Blood trickling down his pebble clung cheek saying, Okay okay okay. Come on. And the mole man nestles his slick form compliantly into the slot of the seat, cursing and shifting under his foul and available breath. Ruggles watched a uniformed arm slam these men into a personal silence as the door shut. The man reeked and he sat there in the electric red light and shadows, heaving weirdly, breathing in a sickening and mucoidal capacity. He threw his attention to Ruggles almost at once. As if it had to be so for the man. As if it could be no other way.

What the fuck are you looking at?

Ruggles leaned against the door with this, the further from the man's putrescence and regarded him uncertainly.

What? He asked.

I said, what the fuck are you looking at, you fucking faggot?

The man's face warped rodently at Ruggles. He shot it across the car and said, faggot, again, the closer to Ruggle's face so as to make him flinch as if the involuntary defensive action would prove the very propositions spoken thus far. The rat face flying forth and enlarging in a whore's lighting. Spittle glistening at the corners of the man's fanged mouth. All of his teeth broken and rotted away save the front incisors. Ruggles was trying not to breathe. The man's material form smelled of sour excreta and old furniture and human shit, and breath washed out of his body across the car like some putrid chemical bouquet of sulphur and ethanol. Ruggles glanced at the man the moment he looked away, in profile, studying the investigation of his vehicle. This microcephalic and rank fanged creature in the collision of wheeling blue-red lightbar and stacked headlights. The man swung his beady eyes immediately back to Ruggles, catching him.

The fuck are you looking at?

I wasn't looking at anything.

The fuck you weren't, you fucking faggot. Here.

The man heaved weirdly in his seat and with his arms bound behind him he eyed Ruggles in the sick concatenation of light and began to scoot menancingly toward him across the backseat. A

cumbersome approach in the ruby psychedelia of traffic and police lights. Still faces dragging, along mouths half open. Ruggles pushed himself hard against the door at his right, nearly propping himself to a half standing position with the door at his back.
What the fuck are you doing, man!
Ruggles saw a police officer looking back squinting as his half upright form and he slid down the seat and pressed himself against the door and, caught between these options, the man hurled his amphetamine-deteriorate form, with all of its fragrance and imprint, against the middle of Ruggle's person and an impression of wetness more than anything played upon his repulsed nerve endings. It felt like a dog's weight and Ruggles could not tell if this was the violence yet, if it had begun, or what was happening, and this rank mole's sweat and even blood were now upon him, and the man swang upward from his lap as if from an act of familiar degeneracy and Ruggles felt a droplet of sweat from the man's hair land wetly on his lower lip. He wiped his mouth furiously against his chest and shoulder and spat dryly several times, as if despumating. The man continued his ambiguous assault, leaning back and heaving his rancid armless weight across the backseat into Ruggles repetitively in a sort of insane and laborious exhibition. Ruggles was wretching dryly and his face was all but entirely smashed against the window away from the man. The driver's door opened. The officer's head bobbed in and his eyes went huge.
The fuck are you two doing!
Get this fucking freak off me, sir!
The mole man very actually snarled at this. A sort of high pitched hoarse shriek. And his eyes small and black and bloodrimmed in the wild advance and departure of light swung suddenly up at Ruggles, as if betrayed by him. The officer shook his head and labored out of the front seat and soon was pulling the man back into his seat from the side of the highway and it taking some time and Ruggles asking if this man could not be taken in some other cruiser. The mole man flashed a wild viciousness at Ruggles during the officerless interval between the back door and the front.
I'm going to get you, you fucking pussy.
The officer reentered through the front and put his chin to his chest and mouthed something inaudibly into his radio and he shift the cruiser into driver and pulled forward through the emergency lane, chirping his siren variously, passing along the highway's shoulder. The officer was checking the rearview more often now with his alligator eyes like black suns in a universe of fire.
I'm going to get you, you fucking pussy faggot.
The fuck are you talking about, man?
I'm talking about you.
What about me.
That you're a faggot.
I don't even know you.
I know that you're a faggot, and a fucking pussy.
The officer was driving, listening. He kept his lights flashing above the car as he drove along down the shoulder and each expression of the man and his priorly detained interlocutor was captured in a morphic red dystopic horror and this ratfanged fugitive leaned again confidentially towards Ruggle in antic flickering deflexure, and each word that slid from the stinking pink

cavity of this man's hammer-clawed maw seemed along with a sort of sick pace and distortion that red light and conflagration alone could abide and Ruggles thought himself in literal hell. And having reached hell, he was more still more disgusted by this person across from him than anything and concerned about the drop of sweat that had reached his mouth. These still primary in this place of permanent condemnation. Considering the potential pathogenic or contagious features that sweat can lend as the cruiser wove down the exit onto a service road that lead to the jail. The officer pulled up to the gates and a man came out with a clipboard and waved him through and there were bright lights posted along the fences, woven with razor wire all about the perimeter. Officers waved them into a garage and they were sliding along through cones into a hall of flourescent yellow light. The mole man was still watching Ruggles from his shadowy seat, breathing weirdly.

I'm going to fuck you, pussy.

Sialoquent spatter silhouetted in the moonlight. Ruggles sat up in his seat very suddenly and almost formally and turned to face the man straight on.

You're going to what?

I'm gonna get you, you fucking bitch.

Ruggles checked the rearview mirror for the officer's bored eyes. They were elsewhere. He leaned across the backseat towards this rank man as if confiding in a friend.

Actually you're going to get fucking hurt is what's going to happen. Did you know that?

The mole man suddenly pulled back against his own door as if some will drove him there of its own propulsion. Glittering disgustingly in the half light and slick all about his person with any number of fragrant secretions and sebum. The man made a shrill noise of suction between his teeth and his small and cruel face shone clearly as they dragged along, slowly waved into the flourescent wash of light the color of curdled milk that hung hovering in sheets in the garage. Ghastly was his face in the building light. Narrow set eyes like glistening blackly like leeches. His over-jetting and lone incisors glistened a bright caked yellow and dried slaver outlined his fiend's lips. His eyes upon Ruggles now. Moustache ragged and sparse. Glaring with eyes inspired by the threat.

Is that what you think? Hah? He asked.

Ruggles checked the rearview mirror again and spoke. The officer was watching.

You don't have enough problems at this point as it is. Is that right? You need something with me, as well? Your affairs with the state won't do by themselves.

Ruggles saw the officer in the mirror laugh absently at this. The mole man noted it and his eyes rolled about the car like something on fire and he glanced at Ruggles for a moment and then glanced away and suddenly lurched a little again across the seat at him, his sick fragrance pendulous and rank. Ruggles pursed his lips. The man seemed to have run out of behavioral patterns for the situation. He eyed Ruggles outfit.

Gimme that jacket, he said.

The officer pulled past the waving correctional officers and he parked the cruiser in the garage and two guards opened both of the back passenger doors at the same time and the man was pulled away small and ape-proportioned around the other side of the car and just as soon as he was, he was at Ruggles shoulder. Stood at the entrance to the jail.

Gimme that jacket.

Fuck off.
I'm going to get that jacket you faggot.
I'm going to hurt you when we get in there if we land in the same place.
They were being jostled forward from behind and front by the two guards into the jail's processing room.
Ruggles looked over his shoulder, his eyes met one of the correctional officers.
How ye doing, sir.
The man said nothing and continued to push him along from behind.
Ruggles was brought to a holding cell with a dungeon's unpainted rock walls and a large drain in the floor and a huge black guard stood therein padding a small bat in his hand. He ordered that Ruggles undress naked before him and bend over and cough and lift his testicles as if in the performance of some manner of saturnalian and ritual exhibition. The guard then took a small light from his blue pants and he clicked it on and studied the inside of Ruggle's mouth with obloidal light. The guard clicked the light dead a moment later and slid it back into his pocket and he turned and took a pair of white scrubs and white sneakers from a bench at his back and handed these to Ruggles. He told him in a suddenly very loud and commanding tone for Ruggles to dress and to gather up his street clothes and to follow a white line painted on the floor to an pentagonal desk where correctional officers worked detaining and releasing human beings and things arguably less or more.
The huge black guard shook his head as Ruggles passed out of the cell under his gaze and he called in the mole man and said at once, Shit, boy, you stink like hell, and the mole man glared at Ruggles and said, you faggot bitch, as they passed one another. The man put the bat in his belt and he was holding a white handkerchief to his nose. Ruggles shook his head and followed the painted line to the desk like a simpleton. He arrived at the desk. Curious.
Get the fuck back behind that line! An officer thundered from somewhere to his right.
Ruggles froze. Which. Which.
The officer approached quickly and brusquely and soon his large splotchy face was near Ruggles and he was leading him by the upper hem of his jailclothes back to where he should have followed the line to and stood him there and said, There.
Ruggles put his bunched clothes and belongings upon the counter to which the man had conveyed him.
An officer put latex gloves on and said, Boy, pick that shit up, and step back behind the line.
Let's try that again.
Ruggles was uncertain but gathered up his effects in his arms again in a single swoop like a newborn and he backed away from the counter woodenly.
The man rolled his eyes and waved Ruggles forward with a slowly whooping bluegloved hand.
Ruggles stood there at the threshhold of the counter, waiting for the man to tell him when to put his things on the desk. They looked at one another. Ruggles hair partially tonsured and bleached where not cut and his scrubs overlong and cuffed. Eyes bloodshot and wild with amicable insanity. The officer thundered out.
Well come on then, now, put them on the table!
Ruggles put his garments and effects on the table and while the man was rifling through these possessively he asked if Ruggles took medication and Ruggles said that he did and the man

asked what kind and Ruggles said the names of the medicines and the officer said, Hey, Jim this one's gotta go infirmary.
Ruggles saw there was a soda machine behind the desk outlining where the uniformed men milled about processing inmates.
He looked up brightly at the guard holding his socks.
May I buy a soda with the money in my wallet?
The man dropped the garment and said, May you what? Hey, Jim. Yeah.
A soda, may I buy one from that machine, sir?
The officer just looked at Ruggles and dropped his clothes and belongings into a clear plastic bag and zipped it shut, and soon Jim came around the desk and took Ruggles by the arm and led him through a metal detector and then through a door and down a set of stairs to another door, and down a passage leading to the the jail's infirmary.
They walked through the doors. It looked like a small jail within a jail, six cells, with a radial center in which a uniformed man and a nurse sat behind glass flirting and laughing silently among these ruined beings. There was nothing on the module outside of the cells save the space he was being ushered through and one prisoner worker set in a folding chair watching basketball. They walked up to the bubble.
Gotta check one in.
The officer leaned against the counter and Ruggles looked at the miniature prison module about him. Everything was painted white. Ruggles studied what he could see inside the six cells through their smeared windows and inside these he saw crazed and filthy men milling back and forth, some standing at the door, breathing on the fiberglass pane, watching his arrival then resuming some unknowable pattern represent in their pacing of the cell and muttering. Ruggles looked to the window of one cell and the deranged man in it looked at him, eyes huge with hate, and instantly the man therein began cursing and kicking the door of his cell with such force that one could feel the floor shaking, and the guard handed Ruggles to the other guard who had emerged from the bubble. This guard brought Ruggles to a cell and told him to strip again, and when he does the officer hands him a puffy crenellated cloth suit resembling in both structure and color a turtle shell and Ruggles shuffled it over his head onto his degraded form. He was then led out of this cell into another where a frayed brown nylon mat lay on the floor nowhere in particular, without blanket or pillow. The walls white where not peeled to stone. Toilet metal and conjoined with the sink. Seeing this room and a door at his back, Ruggles asked the officer if he could use the phone and the officer did not answer and shut the door.
The cell was an irregular octagon. The floor was painted green. It had been picked away at in several places to pure stone. There was a grated window facing one of the prison's yards in the back of the cell and dark hung tremulous and warping at the window. Giddy. The cell door was a hunter green, as well, and upon it years of sentiment were wrought out in the angular and scratched lettering of many different hands. Someone had written Love God on the door and another later scratched this out to say Fuck God adding Love The Devil and running down the right side of the heavy iron door someone had etched Fucking Faggot Randy Carroll Is A Snitch Do Not Trust Him With Shit, and Ruggles ran his hand along these and scratched his head and walked up and peered out the cell window at the men in the other cells and the pair in the bubble. The inmate worker sat on his folding chair watching the television. He was wearing a white knit

cufi and an orange vest that said INMATE WORKER across the back in large black lettering. Ruggles looked at him, and his sad eyes slid over in sentience and met Ruggle's eyes and Ruggles asked if he could use the phone, or see a doctor, and the man simply shrugged and rearranged himself in the folding chair and adjusted the volume on the television. Ruggles kicked the door. The inmate worker looked at him again, and Ruggle rolled his eyes dementedly toward the bubble, indicating the guard. The man leant back in his chair and hardly swiveling his afghaned head he spoke into a metallic slotted disk and the guard emerged from the bubble a moment later, harried and interrupted, and soon his square head and large desperate blue eyes were bobbing before Ruggle's own at the window of the cell and Ruggles asked where the lightswitch was and the guard said, What, and Ruggles yelled the question again and the officer said, Lights stay on, and forthwith he turned on his polished black heels. Disappearing back in a sequence of fading bootfalls back into his tinted glass casement. The nurse asking what request this new creature had made. Ruggles falling back from the window of his cell into a sort of black river of grief and madness.

And for the next three days, Ruggles Harrgoate sweat, paced, shivered, and slept intermittently in accumulating discomfort and increasing insanity in the foul undying light of the cell. On the third day, the cell door opened and he was brought out of it by two guards who led him down a hallway to a different cell on the same module wherein lay two men on two beds, a black man cowled in a beige blanket and a white man with a gaunted face and long hair, the color of ash and matted with sweat. A third bed unoccupied on the black's side. Immediately upon Ruggle's entrance the white man contorted on his mat and vomited generously through the falling tangles of his long greying hair into a grey plastic receptacle on the floor. The room smelled rancidly of butryic vomit and detoxifying sweat and nothing less. The heavy cell door swung shut at his back. Ruggles stood there blinking for a moment, and then he nodded amicably to the black on the bed and the black nodded back to him with mischievous eyes that rolled comically across the cell to the vomiting white man and then the man pulled the blanket back over his face and shift onto his side facing the wall. Ruggles looked to the right and the white man's enormous and bleary green eyes were upon him at once, haunted and panicked as if having viewed through the screen of stars and the heavens and found some horror there laying beyond massively across the sky. He looked to Ruggles from the bed like some kind of dying supplicant in his last hour calling forth his father confessor.

I'm fucking dying, he said.

Ruggles took a step forward. What's wrong?

I'm going to die, the man repeated. His bright green goat's eyes were filled with tears and kindness was present in their composition. The man's grey brindled hair fell long and wild nigh shoulder length and stringy clusters of it lay matted and thatched across his face diagonally. He was sparkling with sweat even in this aspect of gaunted pallor. Shivering insanely. Teeth chattering like frenetically wielded castanets. He searched out Ruggle's eyes again and started to speak saying, I am, and he stammered once more and drool fell from his lip and his cheeks filled to expansion and Ruggles stood at the foot of the bed while the man vomited again into the receptacle. The black man looked over and shook his head and lay back against the wall. Ruggles patted the bottom of the white man's bed as he wretch in a weak gesture of goodwill and said, It's going to be okay.

He withdrew to the black's side of the cell where a third unoccupied bed sat. These three dying felonious turtles wandering around in their various agonies. The black looked out from his cave of blankets as Ruggles sat down on the mattress.

How long you been down here, big mane?

Three. Three days, today. Or tonight. Yeah.

The black sat up. He was middle aged and, shaking free of his cloak of tawny blankets, he looked like a mythological toad emerging to speak prophecy. He studied Ruggles.

They finna bring us upstairs today.

All of us?

The black rolled his eyes dramatically and gestured with his thumb at the man across from them. I don't know if they'll bring his dead ass up there once he do kick the bucket like he been threatening to, but they gon bring you and me up they or I'm a start slapping motherfuckers.

Ruggles laughed.

You seen the doctor yet, big mane?

Ruggles said he had not. The black nodded slowly and satisifed as if all of these details he had divinated and set to memory some time ago. He looked to Ruggles again.

You gon see the doctor. Then we gon go upstairs.

The white man in the opposite bunk groaned horrendously from his toxin drenched mat and his entire form began to shake insanely. The man was actually rattling, glistering in his grey pallor and slick with febrile sweat. His watery emerald eyes huge and white now upon the ceiling as if the heavens had opened in caesura there above him swirling hypertridimensionally and the man's teeth chattered so forcefully it seemed they were wound from an unseen knob to the clatter. The man gazed at the ceiling and spoke to himself. Visions of winged virtue and trumpets. A gilded tabernacle.

I'm really fucking dying. I know it. I'm gonna fucking die.

Ruggles looked to the black. Anything we can do for him?

The black stretched his arms above his head and yawned and his large glassy eyes glanced over at the suffering rank mass across the room and slid back to Ruggles and said, We can go upstairs and get away from his stank ass. That's what we can do. The black reclined in his bunk and put his dusty brown arms behind his head and repeated himself, looking directly and dramatically at the white man, and Ruggles laughed a bit and sat up from his bunk and wandered in his shell to the cell window and he watched therefrom the guards in their blue uniforms cradle their billyclubs as they spoke. Ruggles wondered what was upstairs. After an hour or so, a different meal of rice and beans was brought to them in three styrofoam packets and the cell door was shut. Melancholy afternoon light at the cell window. The black slept after he ate and Ruggles tried to, as well, and found he could not. Nor could he seem to set himself to any manner of stillness whatever on the bed or elsewhere and he spent much of the time gazing blankly through the scratched pane in the cell door at the hallway. Watching the officers cluster and disperse, talking and laughing mutedly. There was a corkboard on the wall across from this cell that said SAFETY PROCEDURES at the top in blue block lettering. Ruggless stared at this for some time to no avail.

They brought him to the doctor in the late afternoon, a thin Pakistani man with an accent in a cluttered office. The man took his pulse and weighed him and called him Mr. Harrogate and

asked various questions about his health. He took out his stethoscope and Ruggles struck his arms up above him weirdly as if casting a spell on the doctor and held them there as the small dark man pressed the cold stethoscope across the bare and puckered skin of his torso. Across the battle toads and the caricatured leopards with knives in the Gulag tradition.
Sir, I need my medications. I don't feel. Right.
Vot do yoo take? The doctor asked him without looking up from his clipboard.
Ruggles listed three medications and the doctor wrote something on his clipboard and nodded his head boredly and said: O, yes. These. You doonot take these medication anymore. Here. Okay?
Okay? Ruggles repeated, and the man said, That's very good, Mr. Harrogate. Yoowill go upstairs today.
An officer was already at the door with another man. A ragged looking caucasoid derelict with thick square prison spectacles and a slack mouth. Aloof black eyes. The doctor looked at Ruggles on the table expectantly and the guard did, as well, and then, too, the prisoner and all seemed to be waiting for his exit, and so he slid off the metal table and the guard exchanged men with the doctor and ushered Ruggles down the corridor and returned him to the cell. The air was damp and acrid from the white man's exertions. Vomit now spilled over the sides of the vessel and onto the floor in a sort of cohesive colloidal muck of terra cotta muck with gobbets of red. The black parted his hood and gestured toward this mucoidal puddle with his eyes at Ruggles.
He made extra. The black man said and he winked.
Ruggles chuckled and sat on his bunk.
You see the doctor, youngblood?
Yeah. He said I'm going upstairs.
I told you, didn't I?
You did.
Told you you'd see the doctor, too, right?
You did.
The black seemed satisfied at this and the white man said he was going to have a heart attack and the black sunk back beneath his hood aggravatedly and rolled away into his own billowy excruciation facing the opposite wall. The white man said it again and he lay there shaking. It seemed light glowed all about his tortured person in a sort of unaccountable and irrational way. Ruggles went to the foot his bed and he knelt there praying for some time and then returned to his bunk where he and the black sat looking at eachother. The black sat up and swung his chafing bare feet to the floor, the pale bottoms just visible at the heel. Careful not to near the mucilaginous and variously colored mess of vomit on the floor there. With no indication, the door to the cell opened and Ruggles and the black were brought white folded scrubs and white shell-topped sneakers and the two men changed and sat like the least sincere converts in the history of formal worship on their beds for the guards to come back and retrieve them. The black was rubbing his hands together and blowing into them variously. The sky darkled with a cloud and so the light in the waned and the men sat in a sort of developing tableau awaiting in the grey light.
Ruggles sat on his bunk in his clean jail clothes looking between his hands and the dying man's increasing uncottering alternately, and soon two guards appeared at the door and he and the black were shackled at their wrists and taken together down a hallway leaving the infirmary pod. They

went through a set of doors and then shuffled together up the stairs. Two guards walked in front of them, chatting inaudibly and laboriously, and glancing back at Ruggles and the black man. They passed through a door at the landing and it was there that they parted, the black winking hugely at Ruggles, and the men were escorted in separate directions down a bare whitewashed hallway entirely bare save of bulletin boards and various large lettered warnings stamped in blue block letters running along the middle of the wall. Keep your eyes on the inmate at all time. Caution. Dangerous inmates. The guard leading Ruggles along this lovely stroll had a slight limp and he wore a ginger moustache and freckles and Ruggles studied him from behind as he was led, and they arrived at a large blue iron door that read 1E INTAKE and the guard held Ruggles by the darbies and pushed a buzzer and then spoke through a sliding aperture on the door and the door opened a moment later and Ruggles was shuffled into the jail pod and his handcuffs were taken off and Ruggles waited a little at the bubble while the guards conferred, looking about him at the prison bay, some twenty cells. And soon a guard emerged from the bubble walking in a sort of see-saw motion with various items in his hand and he thrust these into Ruggle's hands without instruction or warning and Ruggles stood there at the threshhold with a a bar of soap, a toothbrush, toothpaste. He was told to lock into five.

Lock into five. Now.

A plump black man was having his haircut as Ruggles entered and, free of his cuffs now and goodspirited for the movement, he nodded to one of the men cutting hair, a black, and started goodnaturedly and curious in his direction a few steps.

Is everyone getting their haircut?

Nigga, get in yo fucking cell fore they lock us down, forreal.

Ruggles swerved away from the barber, as the bulbous brown man having his haircut at this time had taken up yelling, as well, and there were eyes upon him from every cell window lining the opposite wall and he slouched weirdly and scanned over to a cell with the number five painted on the door and the door opened automatically with a whirring rattle, and Ruggles entered the cell where a fat toothless white man with fleshy tattooed arms lay on the bottom bunk looking at a magazine. The man's eyes were ghoulish and ruined in his huge face and he screwed them up at Ruggles as he entered and at the moment of Ruggle's having passed the threshhold into the room, he began in a loud voice that Ruggles had stepped where he had just fucking cleaned and before Ruggles could make the narrow pass to climb to the unclaimed top bunk the man stood up heavily from his bed, groaning and muttering to himself, or to Ruggles it was uncertain. He knelt and retrieved a damp rag and plastic spray bottle of cleaning fluid from beneath his bunk.

Now I gotta clean this again, right?

Sorry about that, mate, I'm not sure what.

It's not about sorry, the fat man said loudly, exaggerating his ridiculous burnishing as he knelt again and sprayed and ran the towel across what appeared to be for all intents and purposes an arbitrary section of the grey painted floor situated some nine inches from the cell door itself.

Ruggles stood there blinking. The cell was so small that the man's voice could be felt in the very person of Ruggles. It was four by six feet and painted white and the ceiling was low and the door was brown and the bunk beds ran the length of the left side of the room. One had to shuffle sideways in all their movements but entry and exit through the cell door. The toilet and sink were of shining iron and combined into a single plumbing entity and the pod held nineteen other such

cells outfitted in the selfsame manner, with individuals largely of the selfsame manner. Some will obsessed with legitimate or illegitimate domination. These twisted faces that Christ rose and gazed upon in horror.

Ruggles climbed up onto the top bunk with his blanket, soap, and toothbrush. He watched his cellmate's wide back sway from above as the rag and bottle were returned beneath the bunk and the man continued speaking, whether again to himself or Ruggles he could not tell, but he heard the word etiquette and Ruggles lay on his bunk and asked the man what time dinner was brought and the man beneath him said, You just don't fucking stop, do you? Ruggles felt himself being backed into something cryptic and dangerous.

The fuck are you talking about? Relax.

The man was suddenly up and wrenching Ruggles arm against the bunk and the thin air below.

Get the fuck off me!

The man held him there, almost hanging from his very arm for a moment longer and he levered it down a final time and then released him and disappeared from sight below, and soon the fat man was back up and babbling and apologizing, walking sideward about the cell, offering his hand to Ruggles for another initial introduction, saying that they got off on the wrong foot. He said his name was Bernard and his voice was whining and high and his form huge and dumb and pink and he spoke fast and aggravatedly and his gums flapped audibly as he spoke and he was stupid, and there was no better way of putting it than that, and Ruggles sat stunned on the top bunk at these erratic shifts in dynamic and insane introductions and he wonder who inhabited this form, or how many, and his arm ached at the shoulder socket and he said, Whatever, it's just whatever, and the man did not seem satisfied with this and he went on.

It's just basic etiquette. It's just basic etiquette. You're gonna have to learn it though sometime. Sometime you're gonna have to just learn it. You see the towel on the toilet? Keep it folded like this. Don't spit in the sink. Wipe the toilet down after you piss. What'd you say your name was again?

Ruggles.

Ruggles, it's just basic ettiquette. And it's the principle of the thing. Do you know what I'm saying?

What is the principle?

That's what I'm telling you.

What is it?

What?

The principle.

The. The. What?

Nothing.

So, anyway, Ruggie, I'm just telling you it's basic etiquette. But, anyway, whatdya in for little buddy?

I'm not your little buddy. I'm not anyone's little buddy.

Is that right. Well so whatdya in for?

I don't know. I don't want to talk about it.

The bunk bed had three slots and Ruggles perch and his mat was on the topmost slot and it was rusted and perforated with fleur-de-lise in the metallurgy and aching on the bed in fever his brain

cried out for his medication and the ceiling warped frighteningly close to his eyeballs lying prone and he lay in horror with this huge disgruntled pachyderm rambling beneath him in correction and threat as various and sundry delenda of his unconscious cycled forth and receded, like some hesitant assassin, and pure fear in its most profound epistemological expression remained coiled on his nerve endings. His brain felt dry or some other sensation he had not the intellecutal energy or organization to articulate and so he couldn't identify this horrifying sensation in word and it haunted him like some incomprehensible spectre and he sweat now associate with his withdrawals and the man's movements on the bottom bunk and across the narrow cell were almost all exaggerated with perceived offense. Ruggles heard the man, his enormous pink face like a hippotamous still issuing occasional aggressions and instructions. Faking laughter to himself at Ruggle's gauche entrance into prison life.

You and me. You and me. We're gonna have a problem I think. I think we're gonna have a problem. How about this? Just don't interrupt me when I'm reading my magazines, okay? Is that too hard?

Yeah.

And in his mind in the topbunk Ruggles felt the room constricting and the walls taking on the properties of water to realign the closer to him and there is not enough room he thinks to himself and he thinks of panicking from claustrophobia and how there is not enough room to properly panic or even flail one's arms and he has to calm himself from this and soon a name is repeating in his head of a grade school classmate: James Lockhart, James Lock Hart, Jameslock Hart and it playing in a loop within him against his will and the thin brown mat beneath him creaking and unaccountably hot with his sweat now and when he creaks in the bunk from the slightest movement the man says from below that he asked for one fucking thing, that Ruggles not disturb him when he's trying to read his fucking magazine and he is speaking loudly and Ruggles says nothing and is trapped in the warping transitional brain in withdrawal from psychotropic medications and he feels pure fear as if alive on his skin, as if he were some creature burnt, swollen with infection and crouched in a circle of predators, and sleep becomes impossible as nightfalls and the man grumbles late into the night beneath him and Ruggles falls asleep eventually and dreams he is standing at an intersection. It is twilight and cars whoosh by and he cannot make progress toward the convenient store across the street where so much relies upon his buying a soda and a pack of cigarettes. The cars will not stop. Or he grows paralyzed at the crossing. Or the door of the store vanishes with the extension of his hand toward the handle and finding nothingness upon slanting arrival and so he repeats this until he is woken to the cell door opening and closing in the early morning dark. Breakfast had been brought by the podmen in two styrofoam packages and Ruggles let his sit on the small desk by the grated window and listened to Bernard slurp and gum his morning meal below him. He shuddered at the slick porcine sounds the man's dining gave off and the name ran through his mind more and Ruggles begged God to let him die and God would not let him die. Instead, He would let him continue to suffer exactly where he was in that bunk and it's still before daylight when Ruggles climbs down and seats himself upon the cold steel bowl of the toilet. He hunches himself over as if for more cover and tightens his eyes shut and against all instinct is able to move his bowels and immediately upon having voided his belly Bernard is standing over him yelling so loud that Ruggle's first thought was that the man's voice would wake the entire pod, and Ruggles is looking up at this bloated

and cantankerous fleshy man repeating in the predawn dark that, That's just not how ye do it in here and you're really gonna learn, Ruggie, you're gonna learn, Ruggie. It's called ettiquette. And the man is gesturing wildly with his flabby arms and babbling over him there like some vaulting creature above him gargoyled on the toilet bowl and at a pause in this man's ranting, Ruggles asks half sarcastically if he can wipe himself and the man returns to the lower bunk talking to himself about the problems they are going to have. These interactions not yet apparently constituting what his cellmate deemed to be their problems. The morning light is grey and terrible and it trembles at the edges of the cell as Ruggles climbs back up to his bunk.

Strange spectres come to plague him now in these times: In suspension and warp. In shadow and light. Proxied through the person of his cellmate or decarnate altogether: A generation of vipers convulving and twisting frantically upon the elastic and adhesive heat of his bunk. Swirling above him like thatches of black ectoplasm to which gravity had yielded. They hissed and lunged and there moving in spirals all about and piled upon him he saw all the world devenustate, the galaxy in ruins seen through a broken mind. Sound passed through the cell as someone shouted, Yeow, through the slot tab in their cell door and light slid quickly up the walls and all form was lost to Ruggles there staring now at some fanged and demented inversion of his mother perched wide-eyed and white-faced on the end of his bed in her tatterclad and browning graveclothes. She sat folded there on her perch like some pale, insane gargoyle the stonemason had set inward facing to slither in tongues and riddles of things seen and not seen and to taunt the child within the father there broken on the bed in drenched ruin like some sparking and suddenly baritone android and she does ask him if anyone he ever loved still loved him so and he tries to roll away and moving spider-like and sudden and swiftly she is at his side, beside his head on the bunk and she does ask him if God himself could remove him from this cell, and he turns again and wipes the sweat from his brow and he watches as she sweeps up her rags and alights on him like some great bird of death fanning her arms out and arching her back skyward and the light recedes out of the back window and there is a roar through the celling and the bunk is shaking as if spasming and this white-painted diablie leans her face toward Ruggles with her eyes shut deliberately and in closing the distance between their faces in deflexure she opens her eyes and he sees the persons of his two brothers as spectating and nude homunculi peering out from his mother's eye sockets and looking upon him viciously and cursing him and laughing. And was it not true then that all love had left him an orphan and wanderer among the fixed world and God had not it seemed preserved in the heart of even one living soul love for the person of Ruggles save perhaps his daughter and thinking of her little form his eyes welled up with hot tears and he nuzzled his pillow away from these tormenters to blot the tears. A serpent flickering beneath a damp frond. A wolf down a snowy slope. He opens his eyes and the ceiling is closer and so, too, the wall to the left of him and it is night again and the heat is unbearable and below him he hears creaking and whining and Bernard believes himself to be masturbating discretely and Ruggles is frozen with disgust in the top bunk, certain that the mat has electrical heating pads inside of it that are burning him and so he scans the whole of it with his hand for some point of ingress and finding one at his waist rips the vinyl cover and finds only a yellowing sponge within and no such devices therein unbelievably and some new wraith hangs now in the corner, in the darkest corner, with eyes colubrine and yellow and beady like black suns in a galaxy of fire and Ruggles cannot see this creature entirely though there in the dark it hung something like halfman, halfdog

stood upright on cloven hooves and Ruggles sat up at this and hit his head so hard against the ceiling that his skull resonated with comprehensive vibration like a tuning fork that rung so that it carried into his very teeth after the impact and a dull ringing consumed these murky notions, this dark magick, and throaty laughter escaped from the corner and Ruggles awakes again to see a third prisoner, a black man, being brought into the cell carrying his towel and soap and toothbrush. The man flashed a look at him in the top bunk and nodded and set his belongings and mat on the middle rack. Ruggles wiped the sweat from his brow and rolled on his side and watched the man's back from above as he made his bed, tucking the white sheets in along the bed neatly and knotting them beneath the mat at the bottom before doing the same with his woolen brown blanket.

The black was a dark skinned man in his thirties. He had narrow features and bright eyes and good teeth. He moved quickly arranging his effects and Bernard was suddenly up and obsequiously introducing himself to the black. Speaking in suddenly affected crude ebonics as if for credibility, and offering him various hospitalities and so forth in exaggerated pleasantry. The black rolled his eyes and looked up at Ruggles.

What choo you doin' here?

I don't want to talk about it, man.

I can respect that.

Thanks.

Ruggles set his cheek on the top bunk's rack and looked at the smiling black man.

Are they just arresting anyone they find out there? Everyone is gone, right?

The black took his shirt off and said, What the fuck you talking about nigga, of course they taking us all in, and he folded the shirt neatly and he was tattooed across the chest and the shirt, once folded, he placed on the corner of his bed and then stood up at the bunk again and drummed on the rack of the cage itself and it rattled and he stretched his arms and did a few spins and looked up again at Ruggles.

Nigga, what the fuck is up with your hair?

What does it look like?

Like, nigga, a reverse fade or some shit. Nigga look like George Jefferson.

I don't know. Ruggles scratched his partially tonsured skull. It's just what I've got going right now, I guess.

You a funny motherfucker. What's your name, mane?

Ruggles. You?

Chuck.

Nice. What are you doing here?

Nigger, I am here for chi-ld su-pport. Turned myself in last night.

How much you owe?

Enough that a nigga got come sit in the joint while it's worked out.

I feel you.

They taking us out to rec in a second, the black said rubbing his hands together and side-stepping along over to the cell-window and bobbing up and down at it. He had just taken off his shirt but all of his mannerisms gave the impression that he was trying to get warm.

I haven't been going out to rec. I'll grab chow or whatever, Ruggles said from the bunk.

He’s burnt, hissed Bernard from the bottom bunk to the blac. He’s fucked. Burnt.
Ruggles sat up but stayed clear of the ceiling this time. The black was looking at him with a smirk. Ruggles swung his legs down and sat on the bed hunched.
What the fuck did you just say?
I said you’re burnt. Done. Bernard pointed at his head as he said this, gesturing to the black. He sho is, he said weirdly.
I’ll be out of here in two weeks, you fat fuck.
The man rolled his heavy flesh out of the bunk, his body warping and twisted with the sudden exertion, and Ruggles hopped down onto the floor with a smack of white rubber soles. The black stood between them there, because there was no place else for him to stand in the cell. Bernard looked like some huge tattooed pachyderm there bobbing over the black’s head, putting his fist into his hands in a dumb caricature of violence. He looked at Ruggles and said, You fucking faggot, and the huge man lunged across the slight clearing made by the black’s position at Ruggles and growled to test his mettle, and Ruggles felt heat flash all through his limbs and his hands atremble and he took his shirt off and tossed it on the third bunk, saying, You think I’m a fucking bitch, don’t you? You can’t let it be, can you? You fat fuck.
Ah, shit! The Black said, laughing and unexpectedly impressed with Ruggles. A wave of pink face and snakes eyes swooped in again on Ruggles cursing. Ruggles put his fists up.
Let’s do it then.
Chill y’all. Chill. Not in the cell.
Okay, Ruggles said. He was staring at Bernard.
When they pop the door for rec, we’re gonna fight on the floor out there.
Bernard waved his arms at the black in protest and whined.
Nah-nah. Nah. We fight, we’re gone fight in here.
No, Ruggles said, because when I knock your fat ass out you’ll fall and break your skull on something in here. And I’ll get murder charges.
The black looked at Ruggles with wide eyes and back to Bernard for response.
You’re a faggot, you pussy, Bernard said. He laughed weirdly and looked to the black for confirmation and found none.
I think he alright. The black man said. Nigga is ready to fade with you if you’ll take it. And he’s right, you gotta fight behind the stairs in the thunderdome nigga aint no nigga getting down in they cell for that exact reason. Niggas cracking they head and shit.
Ruggles rolled his shoulders and stared at Bernard.
Let’s do it, man. I can’t see another way with us now. When they pull the door for rec, I’m going behind the stairs and you’re going with me.
The black grinned and swung his head again to Bernard.
N-n-nah. We fight, we fight in the cell. We gone get it done, daddyo, right, Chuck?
Aint no niggas fighting in jail cells nigga there’s three feet of room.
You heard him, Ruggles said. You fucking pussy, you’re bitching out. It’s laid out for you.
Niggas get down under the stairs.
Bernard swung about disgruntedly and muttered to himself and the door popped behind Ruggles back and he looked to Bernard and said, Let’s do it.

As if through some antennae attuned for incipient violence and this alone it seemed attention was on Ruggles the moment he walked shirtless out of his cell door. The other men. Some just waking up. All in various states of disrepair shuffled along watching quietly and waiting for something to happen. All of them in the same sad white cloth and shell-topped sneakers. Murmuring to one another. These men were tattooed across the neck and face, the arms and legs. They were scarred and mostly toothless. Some were fast-talking and boastful and some perverted and all these deviants like a school of fish expanded and constricted in relation to the tension manifesting at the fifth cell.

Chuck emerged from the cell behind Ruggles. Ruggles shirt was still off.

These niggas finna get down in the thunderdome.

Ruggles nodded weirdly to the audience that had been addressed on this point and he walked with the black across the pod towards a blue wall behind the stairs leading up to the third row of cells and the prisoners followed along behind like men who had seen a miracle performed and had been changed by it.

Whose fighting, someone from the crowd..

Chuck pointed.

This nigga, and that fat nigga over there.

The prisoners fanned out in the back toward Bernard, enveloping him in a kind of synchronised rush and suddenly reorganizing as if all at once to place him at the fore with Ruggles.

Ruggles put his fists up and skipped about a bit, rolling his shoulders, alternating feet. His tattoos looked like a page of some gnostic comic pamphlet had been illustrated upon his person. The prisoners were yelling now. Someone yelled, Kill, over and over again. Bernard turned to face the prisoners swarmed all about him.

I said we could fight in the cell! I don't feel like fighting out here. Guards could see, y-y-y-you know? Hah.

A huge black man at the front of the crowd who had eyes the size of a cow and a full pair of white teeth grinned wide and escorted Bernard by the arm disjointedly to a position facing Ruggles again. He looked at Bernard.

Guards don't give a shit. It's time to get down, partner. Ye man's ready.

That's right, Ruggles said.

Bernard threw his hands up in protest and said, Fuck this. He looked at Ruggles again and called him a fucking faggot and turned away to wade through the howling gauntlet of prisoners. Almost everyone of them called him a fucking pussy and that verbatim and as he passed depleted his gums flapped soundlessly among the noise and he fell through the crowd shoving all about him like some huge pink holiday display deflating and flapping torn through the wind into a belligerent crowd.

A giggling young black man jumped about like fire and hollered at the bubble.

Guard! Bring this fat ass bitch to the women's jail! Y'all done put a lady in here, got damn!

Ruggles laughed nervously and felt heat still all through his body but the men crowded about him in victory and respect and Ruggles confusedly shook hands with many of them he had not seen until that harried moment bustled through the crowd to the front of the dinner line, slapped on the back by many hands passing. A guard emerged from the bubble wondering at the outcome, and all the men fell silent save one who reported in affected severity to the officer that

they had accidentally jailed a fat woman and that the guards need to be a little more careful at processing and the prisoners laughed again bobbing about and the guard looked confusedly to Bernard who was now walking the perimeter of the deck with his head down, muttering to himself.

A black man with one eye either shut tight or gone altogether stepped out of line and dramatically to the center of the pod, holding his arms aloft as if waiting for teleportation through witchery. He turned to Bernard.

Roll it up, bitch!

Nigga gotta roll it up.

Nigga need to roll that shit up.

Bernard looked over and shook his head again and kept walking in circles and though the dinner cart had arrived several men took it upon themselves to exit the queue to join him at his side for the laps he now walked.

Time to pack it up, homie.

I'm not going to PC, Bernard told the three men swarming spiritlike about him. Their movements looked choreographed and satelliting, as if they were three ghosts on the stage in some medieval play, demanding that he take his mat and belongings and push the safety concern button at the bubble.

Then you fighting, nigga.

I said I'd fight him in the cell. He backed down.

Ain't no niggas get down in they cell. You checking out today. Or you getting packed out.

Out of the trio encircling him now a middle aged white man with wide set eyes like a goat's and a wild grey beard lunged in and pushed Bernard.

Pack your shit, you fucking blimp.

Everyone looked over from the line and the cell block went silent. The inmate worker who had been woodenly handing out dinner packages paused, as well, watching. All was electric with incipient violence again. The huge black man was still at Ruggles side. He hadn't noticed until then. He looked at Ruggles and rolled his eyes and said, Nigga, fuck this shit, and then labored over across the cell block with the manner of a supervisor used to incompetence and he went into Ruggle's cell and emerged a few seconds later dragging Bernard's mat and his bedding. Lecturing all the while that niggas don't get down in no jail cell,s nigga don't need to use no code, white man or whatever, to say he's a bitch. The huge man slew the effects and mat across the floor between the benches and the bubble and they slid nigh up to Bernard's feet upon landing. He looked at Bernard. It was silent.

Nigga, I packed your bags for you.

All watched in anticipation. He stepped forward. Unless there's something me and you need to work out over there or in your cell or in the motherfucking furthest reaches of heaven or hell if you feel the need to, big boy.

At this Bernard lumbered over and scooped up his bedding and mat and he began towards the bubble, seeking out Ruggles in the crowd with his shrunken eyes and shoved along and hissing at him, fucking faggot. When Bernard walked up to the bubble, a grinning half-toothless man with unintelligble tattoos on his face waiting by the safety concern button said, Let me do you the honor, okay, ma'am? We apologize for the confusion, and wish you the best of luck at the ladies

jail. And he pushed the button and both guards came out and mechanically took up the man's belongings, for he could not manage them all with the mat, and he gathered up his towel and blanket at his chest and looked sullenly at the crowd, his pink face flushing and adolescent like, and they opened the door and he followed the two guards out with his head down. Someone yelled, This fat faggot is going to prom tonight. And the crowd of white cloth undulated with keeling over and riotous laughter and Ruggles took his dinner package to a corner and sat upon the floor and began to eat and look around and men came up and offered him their square pieces of pumpkin pie that had been put with their chow that evening and these he took gladly and with great tiding and men stood about him there set against the wall eating pie repeating the story of the confrontation and playing out various versions of it and asking Ruggles for confirmation or condemnation at various moments and with the pie he grew drowsy and sedate for the first time in the two weeks since he'd be in jail or whatever it is that this was. A red light and buzzer came on above the bubble and the prisoners withdrew to their respective cells.

Chuck had moved his mat to the bottom bunk and so Ruggles likewise upon reentering the cell lowered his mat and blankets to the center bunk. He made his bed as he watched Chuck make his, knotting the sheets under the head and foot and tucking the blanket likewise. Chuck watched him, smiling.

You think I'm a bitch or something, he said in impression of Ruggles, laughing.

What was up with that guy?

Fat ass nigga is a bitch.

Ruggles nodded and kicked his shoes off and nudged them to a corner still paired neatly next to Chuck's and he drew himself up into this middle rack and stared at the white ceiling through the vesica piscis grating of the topmost bunk above him. The window at the back of the cell darkled with the coming night and the moon hung out of view of the bricked in yard recreation yard alike. A melancholy milk light bedraggled crickets in some far off field and so, too, did it splash upon the yellow and blinking eyes of toads burrowing out of the muddy pockets of a pond at nightfall. But here it could not enter. There was a scheduled alarm bell and it buzzed more than it rang and the lights flickered out across the dorm like dominos and they lay in the dark for a moment shifting. Chuck turned on his side on the bottom bunk and propped himself up on his elbow.

Shiiiit, you know what I was thinking, nigga. What's crazy?

What's up.

Chuck grinned in the bottom bunk.

I don't know, Ruggles, I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around it my damn self. I'm not even sure I should be talking about this shit.

Ruggles sat up propped in the same position. What's the deal, man?

You sure you can handle it?

I think, I don't what you're holding.

Alright, alright. Well, shiiiit, I'm-a tell you, mane.

Okay. Tell me.

Well . . . apparently these white niggas accidentally locked a bitch up in this here men's jail. And Chuck broke out in laughter here and lay back and drummed his hands up under Ruggles bunk and threw a few feints and jabs up from his bed.

That nigga should been born with wheels on him the rate he was rolling it up at.
That guy was leaning on me for two weeks, non-stop, like, trying to dominate me or some shit.
Chuck sighed and bowed his arms behind his head and said, Yeah, well that nigga is a bitch. He thought he had you.
He kept pushing it, man. I don't understand.
The lights in the bubble were left on all night and this refracted through their cell door and half-lit Chuck's eyes in the bottom bunk and he lolled his head and laughed again to himself and said, The nigga's a bitch. That's what he do, because that's what bitchmade niggas do. You been locked down in here for two weeks?
Two weeks today.
Oh. They gon send your ass upstairs tomorrow.
I thought I was upstairs.
Nah, nigga, you in intake. We on the ground floor. They can't keep you here longer than thirteen days, so tomorrow morning they gon' send yo ass packing to whatever dorm they gon' really hold you.
Is it better up there?
Yeah. Niggas got TVs up there. Commisary. Pills. We in the hole basically right now.
Damn. Okay.
They lay in the dark breathing for awhile. A guard shuffled by and swung a flashlight into their room and looked in like an upright insect and to the next he did the same and this every hour. Chuck yawned loudly and nuzzled the back of his head into his pillow and looked up at Ruggles bunk.
Yo, nigga, I forgot to tell you.
What's up.
Chuck paused a moment.
Apparently these white niggas locked a bitch up in this here men's jail and they just caught it tonight.

They came for Ruggles in the morning. He was told to gather his effects and to bring his mat to the bubble. He swept up his bedding and towel and shook hands weirdly with Chuck and Chuck laughed and soon Ruggles was following a guard out of the intake dorm and those who witnessed his harried departure cheered him on for the night before and he was ushered out of the pod and made to account for his effects before the correctional officers. Once verified, they set out through the huge blue iron door, Ruggles in tow. The guard hovered in front of him occasionally looking back, and Ruggles was led through a door up a flight of stairs and through another into a large semi-circular passageway where large iron blue doors each bore a single letter and number. They passed several doors and came to H3 and the guard took his lanyard and held it up to a sensor and they passed into a holding room where guards in the bubble moved about mechanically and impatient. One came up to the window and attended to them.
Harrogate, Ruggles.
The officer said this through the intercom and a hunchbacked guard nodded and looked at Ruggles and shook his head and took out a clipboard and wrote something and returned to the intercom and said, You're all good, John, and emerged a moment later from the bubble and the

men exchanged custody of Ruggles and again Ruggles was made to account for his effects and the guard knocked on the bubble and nodded at the second guard at the control board and the door popped and the guard led Ruggles across the cell block. A half octagon of bright-lit white brick whose tidings consisted of three iron tables bolted to the floor. Two televisions. A combination chin-up bar. Men were out of their cells at rec as Ruggles was brought through and all looked upon him and Ruggles could see sunlight pouring in through the men's cell windows into the dormitory and respectfully he nodded to the men he met eyes with and he followed the little lurching guard to a cell where he was told to enter and he entered and sunlight and warmth drenched the cell and Ruggles already could see from the back window clouds and redbrown and green hills and the tops of old factories, and from the bottom bunk a Hispanic man with curly hair and missing teeth squints up at this tonsured and wild-eyed mystic sprung upon his quarters and he goes back to sleep snoring, and his TV babbles and Ruggles sees the man's commissary on the floor. Soda pop, peanut butter, cereal, pop-tarts, cheese, soup packs, coffee. And he salivated seeing this like some kind of animal and he tossed his effects onto the middle bunk went to the window and stood on the mounted stool and stared out at the ragged white sun and the greenery and he prayed sincere thanks to God for having been moved out of Intake where he could not see sun nor moon. Nor did a single bird even care to void its bowels on the section of bricked in yard his cell gave vision to. Ruggles could not believe there was a television in the cell. He climbed down from his perch at the window and up into his bunk and gazed at the flickering screen. The man below pulled himself awake as if having found himself lying in quicksand and he arched his neck out from the bottom bunk and looked up at Ruggles and studied him like an ostrich. Ruggles looked at him.

I'm Ruggles.

Mondo.

And then the head withdrew back into the bottom bunk and he heard the man yawn and Ruggles sat for awhile and soon grew bored and jittery and all of his brain and body felt like a piece of electrical equipment the wiring of which had been destroyed. He climbed out of the bunk and sat on the stool and looked at the man in the bottom bunk.

Mondo.

Wsup, homie.

Can I buy that peanut butter from you?

Which peanut butter joo talking bout?

In your possibles over there. Under the television.

Joo said you want the peanut butter?

Yeah, my money just showed up on my books. I wasn't eating down there in intake. I was starving.

Mondo stood up from his bed and though he was bleary eyed Ruggles could see some strange schizoidal energy borne therein and the man squinted at the back window and looked at Ruggles again.

What peanut butter joo say joo wanna buy?

That peanut butter, Ruggles hunched himself up and laughed nervously and pointed at the man's items all stacked neatly inside of a transparent plastic box with a lid.

You lookin at my things, ese?

I mean. I was.
I'm just fuckin' with joo homes.
Ruggles laughed again and nodded to where he had pointed before at the peanut butter.
So what's up with that?
Whatchoo mean?
Sell me the peanut butter on credit?
Whatchoo want, you wanna this peanut butter in here? Mondo pointed at the box of dried goods. He took a step closer to Ruggles.
Joo not looking through my things right homes?
Uh.
I just fuckin' with you mane! Joo get high?
Wha-what? I don't know.
I get high homes. That's my thing. I get high and just do my thing homes.
Ruggles looked out the window again. A flock of seagulls flew in formation over the prison yard's razor wiring and when they flew they moved as if unraveling a knot and tightening back together and swooping away out of sight over the prison itself and Ruggles head. Mondo was now seated on his bunk staring red-eyed at the television. Ruggles looked at the side of this man's head. His smashed cluster of curls. His missing teeth and scarred ear. He ventured again.
So . . . What's up with that peanut butter?
Joo said you wanna buy some peanut butter, right?
Right.
Joo got the money on you homes?
Ruggles explained again that he had money on his books, but he could transfer it to Mondo or replace the peanut butter the next time they delivered commissary bags. Already Mondo was staring back at the television, his eyes wide as if understanding some dark secret at the end of the world envisioned there on the screen.
Mondo.
He clicked his teeth. Joo wanna some peanut butter?
Yes, please.
Which peanut butter you wannagain?
I'm going to transfer five dollars to you for your peanut butter down in your commissary box.
Joo not looking through my things again homes?
What?
I just fucking with you homes relax! Joo wanna the peanut butter?
Yes. Yes.
Joo having the money with you right now?
What. What? Ruggles collapsed in the little stool, putting his elbows to his knees and his hands to his face.
Wai-wai-wai, Mondo waved lazily at him like a huge dangerous sunflower.
What's the deal? Ruggles asked, looking up.
Okay, joo not having the monies on you. Joo said you wanting *my* peanut butter or someone else maybe?
That peanut butter.

Mondo clicked his teeth and drew his hands up squinted as if doing some calculation in his mind or praying quickly for the grace of this sinful transaction.
Okay lemme think. Joo wanting to buy the peanut butter right?
Bro. Yes.
Joo get high?
Ruggles got up from the stool and climbed up into his bed and Mondo followed him with his eyes at first then stood up and leant against the bunk. He wore a white tanktop and he had a single tattoo that was illegible on his forearm. Some name. He was missing one of his front teeth and one adjacent to that and had only a few bottom teeth in the front but his face was young and his eyes maniacal and wrought and he put his arms up on Ruggles bunk and looked rightward ponderously toward the back cell window.
Joo wanting to still buy peanut butter?
Ruggles knit his brow and looked up at the sun corruscating on the grating above him where lay a few pornographic print outs and various court papers, an extra blanket and fingernails Mondo had habitually picked and tossed up there. Ruggles looked at Mondo, silhoutted by the arching sun.
Yes.
Okay I sell joo the peanut butter, okay.
Mondo turned for a moment stepping for his box and then turned back to the bunk, a black shadow enveloped in lines of light.
Joo not having the monies on you right now?
Ruggles rolled toward the wall.
I just fucking with you homes.
Ruggles peeked over his shoulder and watched as the man fetched the peanut butter from his box and beheld it for a moment as a father might a new child and frowned. He passed the jar back and forth in his hands a few times and looked pained and then turned to Ruggles and placed it on his bunk.
Joo gonna transfer the money today?
Yeah, today.
Today, right?
Yeah.
Joo gonna transfer the money?
Yes. Today. Are we good? Ruggles took the jar in his hands and gestured down at Mondo with it.
I just bought this, right?
Ruggles climbed down from his bunk with the jar in one hand and sat back on the sunlit stool. Mondo was sitting on the bottom bunk rubbing his hands and looking around insanely. He spun to Ruggles, outlined in sunlight there at the back of their four by six foot room.
Joo get high?
Not yet.
Mondo got up from his bunk and paced the narrow length of cell a few times. He went up and leant against the cell door and looked out and nodded upward with his chin at someone or something and then went to the combination sink latrine and splashed water on his face and took

a hand towel from the hook that flanged down from the wall and he dried his face and hung it back up and looked at Ruggles.
Joo liking peanut butter?
You got a spoon?
Checka da top bunk.
Ruggles stood up on the stool in his crisp white jail clothes and fished about the miscellanea of litter and forms and fingernails and half-disgusted at this point he saw and fetched a plastic spoon from a bag filled with them beneath the dusty crumple of cast off blanket and with this he hopped down and dodged around past Mondo to the sink to flush it with water.
Joo gonna wash that?
Yeah.
You liking the peanut butter.
Yeah.
Joo gonna transfer the monies?
Today.
Mondo was back at his bunk seated, staring into or through television. When Ruggles was done at the sink and removed himself to the back corner stool, Mondo got up and took a crankled plastic spoon of his own from the breast pocket of his scrubs. He had bent the spoon so that it could it rest upright without being held. He set this down and hunched quickly over to the sink with a green empty soda bottle and filled it with water and slanted back side-legged to where he had placed the spoon beside the television. And into this spoon like a miniature birdfeeder he poured water just beneath the edges. And into this water with care he placed three orange translucent squares produced from a folded piece of paper manifesting out of the same breast pocket.
Ruggles ate his peanut butter and it ran through him narcotically and he felt momentary comfort and he watched attentively at Mondo's process and how the pieces of film dissolved into the water like dismasted little square terra cotta sails and the crazed looking hispanic man stirred gently this potion with the tack end of a pencap. Posed in this aspect, he looked like some disgraced alchemist, manic and besourced by his potions. Mondo looked to Ruggles and winked hugely and slid his bulging eyes back to the dissolved mixture. He beheld for closer observation the spoon and looked into the small light orange pool therein solving and, tilting his head back, he poured this mixture into a single nostril and snuffed it back and shook his head as a wet dog does and let out a little yelp and looked at Ruggles and said, Es good, no?
Ruggle shrugged.
You no liking drugs?
They're alright. Some of them, I guess.
Joo liking peanut butter.
Yeah.
Mondo shrugged and slumped back down at his bunk, sitting on the edge hunched devotionally toward the television. His eyes lolled about weirdly and sometimes in separate directions like a calf just born and his eyelids neared to closing at moments and they opened suddenly and he regarded Ruggles inebriate already and warm vaporous waves within him folded and roiled glitteringly and he stretched his warmly sensate arms and looked again at the desperate man he

had met that day and chuckled and put his hand out to Ruggles, saying, Joo not a bad guy. With this they shook and Ruggles repeated the sentiment and Mondo stopped him, holding his hands up as if summoning fire before his chest.
It's okay. I'm bad guy.
You're not a bad guy.
No, I bad guy. Trust me.
The cell had an intercom above the sink and a towel hung from a corner there where a toothbrush had been jabbed in and from this issued an announcement that lunch was being served and Mondo sprung to the door as it popped and he caught it and held it cracked and Ruggles set the jar down and screwed the lid on as if in a panic and followed him out. Once out of the cell, Mondo took leave of him instantly and he had to negotiate the population of the twenty-celled dormitory himself. The dinner cart was across on the opposite side of the cell block and so in going he met the twisted and broken faces of men incarcerated with him there. They watched uncertainly as the newest prisoner took his place in the queue. Heads black and white all turned and regarded Ruggles in the wave of white clothen jailed men and to them all he nodded and seeing upon the table a chocolate milk his spirit rose in celebration and he swept it from the table and took up his queue again and regarded it and nodded and felt cheer and a presiding guard upon seeing this came and rapped his nightstick upon the table from which Ruggles had fetched the milk. All of the inmates looked.
Twenty one and under only, inmate. Put it back.
Ruggles didn't understand what was transpiring and he looked baffled at the million eyes upon him and suddenly understood that this was in reference to the chocolate milk and he placed it quickly back upon the table and said, Sorry, sir.
Men in the line laughed and a few of the youngest looking inmates snarled at him from afar. The man in front of him turned around smiling hugely and giddy with giggling. He was a middle aged black man with a shaven head and a thick beard that gave him the look of some kind of demented civil war hero and his eyes were bright with schizophrenia and so, too, Ruggle's and the man held out his hand and said, My mane!
Ruggles was laughing, Nice to meet you.
Ha. Ha. Ha. My mane knows the truth.
Ruggles nodded along that indeed he knew the truth and they slant together entangled dementedly down the wall's side nearing the cart and the row of podmen dispensed lunch onto paper plates for each prisoner. Both stood on their toes to see inside the steaming trays and men having just gone through the line hung about and swerve around the cart while eating with their hands and watch possessively from the periphery as the rest of the food is robotically doled out, all waiting for arrangements made with the various podmen, all angling for seconds or thirds. They were putting pulled chicken and rice upon the plates and each man was handed a piece of cornbread by a dead-eyed adolescent inmate. Ruggles saw Mondo warming about the cart rubbing his hands and looking around, waiting for delivery on some arrangement. Ruggles took his plate back to the cell and took up in the corner on the stool. There was a small desk affixed to the wall next to the stool and upon this Ruggles set his meal and fell to eating and soon Mondo was back in the cell. He entered with three plastic wrapped pieces of cornrbead which he took and placed in his commissary box.

Joo watching my things? He looked up at Ruggles smiling like some ancient spanish mime suddenly given to speech.
Ruggles shook his head, chewing.
Why joo no eating the peanut butter now? Joo no liking it now?
Ruggles swallowed. The rice tasted like soap because a prisoner told to wash it had indeed washed it with soap, having made an unsupervised practice of this.
I still like it, Ruggles said. I'm just having lunch.
Mondo nodded and held his chin as if Ruggles had just put something cryptic to him and he took up his own spoon and started into the rice, his eyes still rolling around crazily, his arm moving like a trowel back and forth to his mouth. He was chewing when he looked over at Ruggles, as if settling upon the matter at that instant, Joo not a bad guy. And he went back to mechanically shoveling the rice and chicken into his apertured jaw as he stared into the television. Ruggles thanked him and protested again.
You don't seem like a bad guy.
Mondo looked at him as if he had a surprise that Ruggles would like to know about and he shook his head in acceptance and put a hand up in respect of Ruggles assessment but ultimately nodded.
No, I bad guy.
Ruggles took up his paper plate and spun on the stool facing Mondo.
Why are you a bad guy? You seem alright to me.
I kill you if you owe me monies. He held up one hand and extended a finger.
Bang bang, joo know?
Right.
The man shrugged and smiled and turned back to the television and eventually pushed his plate away in disgust and he sat watching Ruggles a bit and looked at the television and back to Ruggles.
Joo gonna pay me right?
Yes, Mondo.
Ruggles finished his plate and looked from his desk there out the grated window through the pattern-holed iron at the pink sky and the wheeling clouds and how they moved so in the wind like film sped up and he looked upon a lighthouse beyond and thought of her and of cigarettes and of soda and how he could rest if he could solve these issues, at least for a time. He finished his plate and looked at Mondo and back to the window. Light strobed in slant through the window grating and it print a matrix of yellow circles on the desk. Ruggles put his hand under the sunlight there and watched as these weightless disks slid up and across the back and front of his hand and up nigh the hair of his wrist and he withdrew his hand and took his plate up and stood and Mondo looked up from the television at him, his deranged eyes rolling about, whether wearily or in revery Ruggles was not certain. Mondo pulled his knees in slightly, glancing up.
Joo need to get by?
Yeah. I'm fixing to throw this out. Ruggles gestured with the damp paper plate.
He had rolled the plate into a cylinder with the plastic utensils snug therein and he slanted by Mondo to the cell door and out of it he exited onto the bright-lit pod floor as if stepping onto a stage before an audience. Men on the floor playing cards or chess watched as he emerged from

the cell and moved about the pod bay floor. They conferenced among themselves and Ruggles knew they spoke of him and most of the men were black. All were unloved. None looked friendly. The two other white inmates besides Ruggle sat by themselves at one of the steel dining tables watching a talk show. The pair goggled at Ruggles as he passed tortured as his form was and he looked at them and nodded. A large bald man with tattooed arms and a shaved head and narrow-set eyes sat as if at council with something like his slack jawed jester, a smaller tow-headed man with wild auburn hair and an underbite who wore longjohns beneath his scrubs and guffawed loudly at most of what the larger man had to say. The laughter warped weirdly through Ruggles fevered mind and he saw these all of these men as parallels of souls that had contracted with the devil, and in having contracted so when they fell to sleep in some other golden realm they awoke here. When Ruggles nodded to the larger of the two whites there set, the man barked at Ruggles viciously and his submissive slapped his knee and hooted and held his ear obsequiously towards his master and Ruggles stared at the both of them and delivered his plate into the trashcan set for the men where the lunchcart had been. The man barked again at Ruggles. Ruggles understood that this was a moment which could not be put off and so he dragged his aching form and his wretched eyes to the where they sat and he tapped the table next to the larger man.

What's up, Ruggle said. Do I know you or something?

What did he say? The man looked grinning at his idiot. The smaller white man's eyes were brown and they looked dumb and entertained and void of any emotion save some regard for the larger white man and his words. Ruggles began again, not understanding the joke or the interactions leading up to or accumulating in this moment.

I said, Do I know you? You're barking at me and whatnot so I'm wondering if we have some association that I don't know about.

Do you smoke crack? The man asked and he grinned viciously again. His eyes were close set and they were green and most of his teeth were intact and one could not see the flesh of either of his arms for the tattoos there. Ruggles leaned back from the table and looked around the dormitory impatiently.

Nah, man. I don't smoke crack, he said. I was asking if we know eachother, because you're acting like you know me, with the barking and all. I wanted to clear it up.

The bald man crossed his arms and leaned back on his seat as if satisfied and he looked to his idiot and when he looked back to Ruggles he was still grinning weirdly. Ruggles studied him. The man's head was the shape of a pear, opening up downward from the crown, and it was pale white and red and stippled with sprouting hair from his last shave and when he turned this head and addressed Ruggles directly again Ruggles could smell his rank breath curling out and see his greying tongue loll in his jaws with each word.

You want to know me? The man asked.

No, Ruggles said. No, I'm not looking for buddies.

Ruggles tapped the table and nodded at the man in finality and, ignoring the confusedly giggling man in longjohns altogether, he continued along the perimeter of the pod tracing his hand along the painted brick and the cell doors and the three phones along the south wall, and the blacks having sussed something of the interaction now nodded brightly to him from their chess and coffee and there was a talk show playing in duplicate on the dorm's two televisions and Ruggles

looked up at it and it was alien to him and the pacing was as boring as everything else there and with no more challenges put to him he returned to his cells and Mondo pulled his knees in without looking away from the television and Ruggles snuck past and took up his seat at the small stool in the back of the cell and the day was lonely and long and Ruggles spirit despaired and he reviewed horrid memories, ruined futures. He stood up on the stool and leaned against the caged window at the back of the cell. Clouds had spread in fantastic display across the afternoon sky centering in a central vaccuum through which the sun glittered. Ruggles pray for relief from his fevered and confined condition. He was not convinced upon looking out the window that he was anywhere in his county, state, or on earth for that matter. He climb down after a bit and read the sentiments scratched into the desk and there he read some horrible fate and sought elision of it and having no implement he fell in with Mondo watching the television. Mondo looked up at him.

Where's jore peanut butter? Joo not liking it now?

It sat on the desk behind Ruggles in clear view.

Ruggles gestured back with his head, tilting.

It's behind me, on the desk. No, man, I still like it.

Mondo looked back to the television as if a real concern had been satisfied in him and watched the television in awe, as if being pulled downward into the floor by what appeared on the screen there, and the matrix of light was no longer on the desk and Ruggles collapsed into his arms on there, burying his head in his jail clothes. All of them he had left behind. Or they had left him. Everyone. And he, a father. All of them were gone. She was right. There was not true love for him in the heart of any single man or woman walking the earth save in his daughter and this did not console him but instead made him wish for death and the afternoon is long and wild in his mind and it is horrifying.

Okay, he said aloud. That's about enough for today. Ruggles sat up and spun in the stool toward the television.

Joo say something for me?

No, no. I'm just talking to myself. I'm just bored.

Mondo nodded weirdly as if uncertain and looked back to the screen and Ruggles tried to watch and found that he could not sustain his attention against his fevered brain and restlessness and Ruggles scanned the cell and there was nothing to look at but a whitepainted brick wall on either side and the walls took on the properties of liquid to his vision and shifted closer and from this he tried to hide his eyes and looking to the television again spectres found him there on the screen and Mondo nodded as if in understanding at the screen and then turned and smiled and winked at Ruggles like some kind of kabuki performer about to perform the reveal of a magic trick and bade him back to the television with his eyes and head and Ruggles looked and saw all the world's integument sundered and spilled across the galaxy in septic and eternal collision with the universe like brown blood in great waves rushing through the darkened heavens. The galaxy devenustated and all worlds inhabited by creatures in a constant and fevered state of repetitive satisfaction.

Mondo was springing from his seat to the door when Ruggles woke sweating on his bunk. The guards had announced chow over the intercom and Ruggles tried to gather himself out of his bed and he could not nor could he understand where he was and he looked to the window in the back

of his cell and thought himself in some variant of his college campus and he could not remember where he was and if he was taking classes and he then thought himself perhaps in a van with two beds because of the cramped nature of these alien surroundings and still in this dream he slid down from the bunk and Mondo said, Joo no step on my bunk again, okay, and Ruggles thought some diabolical ghost channeling through him and he nodded and said, Got it, and Mondo vanished at the door, already across the dorm by the cart as Ruggles passed out of the cell. There was a black kid with hair like a tarantula and a child's face and womanly eyes bobbing wildly outside Ruggle's cell, apparently waiting for the man himself. He had been in intake with Ruggles and had been loudly removed from intake to the hole after seeing his elderly white cellmate eat a piece of bread off the floor and, this being too much for the young man, they coming to violence on this issue and the boy was lost for weeks in transfers, having interrupted his intiial processing with this offense, and now finding himself on H3 with Ruggles. Who he apparently took for an established friend.

Nigga, where you been! The young man launched like some kind of spider monkey from his bobbing and uncertain positioning and hugged Ruggles, and Ruggles hugged him back laughing at this display of affection, patting him on the back.

Good to see you, man. Good to see you. I was stuck in intake for, like, another week. What'd they end up doing with you?

They fell to walking together to the dinner line. All of the men in their own time accounted for this new alliance and turned back to the dinner line. The boy jumped hugely with each step, flying up and down at Ruggles shoulder, his dreadlocked hair swinging about in strange clusters like a crown of pinecones.

Ahhh, mane. They sent me down the hole for like three days. Then I kilt two niggas.

What do you mean killed, man?

They stood jostled in the line together. The young black faced him.

I mean, like, I was down there and they was fucking with me and like, one of em try to poke me up and I called for guards and I'm like backing into my cell and I hit the one nigga and sleep him and he hit his head and died and I took the shank off the other nigga and stabbed him with it. He died, too, mane. Shit is crazy. I'm stressin.

He shrugged and smiled and bounced strangely as if gravity was in constant negotation with his body. Ruggles furrowed his brow in skepticism, What'd you say your name was, man, I can't recall?

Ah, man, of course! He put out his hand again. He looked as if he was standing on a wave the manner in which he was constantly up and down and observing his surroundings. He extended his hand again.

Wayne, mane!

Ruggles. Yeah, I couldn't recall.

They slapped hands and his hands were rough like a tree trunk and he seemed filled with some insane joy to be stood next to Ruggles and Ruggles did not understand this but accepted it and as they neared the cart he leant over and asked the kid, You didn't kill no two people, did you?

Wayne looked at him like he had just solved a riddle.

Mane, I did fight those niggas for real.

They took their plates and the inmates serving them bore no emotion whatever in their eyes as they woodenly scooped from one of three trays, harried all the while from the front and sides. Wayne and Ruggles took their dinner to the table in the back nearest his cell. There were a row of phones on the wall behind Wayne and men stood at each of them and there was one folding chair unaccountably there where everything was bolted down and a black man on the phone leaned back with his plate on his chest eating and speaking into the phone. Wayne couldn't stop looking around. He chewed and looked constantly around him speaking of hypothetical violence against the other inmates. He looked to Ruggles.

Mane, he smiled, Why you aint work out with me today, Ruggles?

Ruggles laughed. What do you mean, Wayne? I didn't know. I'll work out with you.

Wayne looked like someone had handed him a gift and his insane black eyes lit up with excitement and he rocked back and forth, and Ruggles could smell muted body odor come off his person and he shook this away and wondered at this child of violence and why he had taken so to him.

Tomorrow, nigga? Wayne asked.

Yeah, Ruggles said, we can work out tomorrow or whatever. Wayne, what are you doing in here?

What choo mean?

I mean, what happened before you got arrested and taken to this jail.

He clapped his hands together and had a look in his eye as if a song he enjoyed had started playing over the general intercom.

Ah, shit, mane. Okay, yeah. Yeah, I beat the shit out my auntie and uncle, fam. I was wilding on them, my nigga, forreal.

Wayne bounced and rocked in his seat across the table, his skin chafing and dark black and his jail clothes loose upon his frame, and he turned back to Ruggles from having scanned the periphery again.

One time I shot this nigga and I saw his brains on God nigga on my momma.

Ruggles shook his head and continued chewing as he heard this.

Wayne went on. It was like 'Bow!' and then I look, and, like, on God, this nigga's brains is like right there on the dash and the cement.

Ruggles held his hand up and hushed him and said, Wayne, bro, you cannot say anything even remotely like that ever. Even if it's true. Like not to anyone ever. Especially not in here, man. There are motherfuckers who will go testify that you said that shit and you will be put in a cage for the rest of your natural life.

Wayned laughed and said, Mane, you're crazy, and fell to eating in some kind of final rush seeing most of the men now half sedate and reclined at their empty plates. He looked up, his mother's eyes he must have, her face.

You want my pie, Ruggles?

Really?

Of course, mane! Whatchoo mean, Really?

Wayne slid the pie over and Ruggles said, Thank you, man, and took to eating it immediately and nodded and said, You're a good man, Wayne, with his mouthful. He went on, half chewing. Just got to take it easy with all that. Homicidal talk or whatever. And Wayne laughed brightly and accepted this with a weird huge smile leaning against the smooth steel table, and his dreadlocks

bounced and were reflected therein like he prayed to a huge dancing spider and he started scanning around them again narrating as men moved toward the trash with their plates. He looked back at Ruggles.
You ready my nigga?
We're not going to war, Wayne.
I'm just saying let's do this shit.
Let's do it.
And the two took up their plates and walked to the trash amongst the others and were no doubt considered an odd pairing but an accounted for one at that now and their threat level assessed and so forth and they moved through the yawning and cursing crowd and disposed of their plates and Wayne hug Ruggles again as the buzzer called them to lock back down and bobbed off out of sight to his cell. The cell seemed dark as he entered and Mondo was already seated bloodshot on his bunk at the television and when Ruggles entered he look up with alien insanity trembling at the edges of his black eyes. Ruggles registered that this countenance was not friendly and wasn't certain what to assign it to and so he passed by Mondo on his bunk and sat on the stool as before and was about to share with Mondo what Wayne had told him for veification when Mondo stood up and began pacing back and forth across the small length of cell, throwing his arms about wildly, and coming near to striking Ruggles with the proximity. Ruggles leant back and put a hand up weakly.
What's going, are you good?
Mondo turned accusitorily with huge eyes from the sink and he dried his hands and began pacing the length back and forth again.
Joo and me. We need to talk.
Okay?
Ruggles pulled himself back on the bench. Mondo stopped pacing and stood close and essentially over him there at the stool. Suddenly things were dangerous and this man was a stranger whose face was lost save his eyes in the dark of the heights above him and these eyes full of violence. The man was trembling with rage nearing him, backing Ruggles against the window.
Earlier. You sleep. Right?
Ruggles nodded uncertainly. Yeah, man, I woke up for chow.
Okay, so earlier you sleep, right.
Right.
Mondo started pacing again. Before you fall asleep, you remember this time? He paced prosecutorially to the cell door and still swinging wildly back on his third step into Ruggles space. Ruggles watched him. Everything in the cell was suddenly subject and object, and dominance was being put almost put through act itself to task, and Mondo paced and went on.
Okay, good. So. Dooring this time, joo sleep? You break wind and — then! He put his finger offensively close to Ruggles eyes.
Then you try scratch the mat! With your toe! To cover up!
Ruggles stared at the finger and felt his hair and skin cold against the grated white windowpane. The accusation was true and Ruggles put his face in his hands, half for cover and half for shame,

and the room seemed to be shaking with this man's sudden rage and Ruggles bore down and endured more on the subject.
Joo no havin' respect. I think. What it is. Joo no havin mannerism.
Ruggles looked up at the man. His eyes were insane with anger and they rolled around like billiard balls in his head so wide were they in his apoplexy and Ruggles, through his hands, could see the man quaking and brimming with either restrained or incipient violence. He paced and spoke.
Joo no say excuse me when this happen.
I was. I was half asleep, man.
The discomfort Ruggles felt was such that it was almost overwhelming to him there on the stool, folded up and blushing. And with this shame there came an entire series of sensations of alternating heat and cold, of numb and sensate.
So no one teach you basic respect, is jore problem.
Ruggles just said, yes, and understood he must bear the man out. The disoriented young hispanic criminal with the curly hair and huge eyes swung back and forth and Ruggles gave way to him, and Ruggles said yes he understood that from that point forward they would each follow a certain set of rules within the cell such as Mondo had just stipulated with regard to their digestive tracts and Ruggles agreed and the crazed man went on pacing and half ranting and soon Ruggles climbed into his bunk defeatedly and filled with dread as the man cooled down and took up again at the television. Ruggles lay on his stomach there and stare at their cell door. The room was hot and there was nothing for him in it save a toothbrush and soap and peanut butter which might now have some unknown possessory transition according the man's mood and great sorrow was upon him and idly he watched the television, as well, and soon fell to sleep where he dreamt of the same intersection.
Here, see him through it. He is renting a room, it seems, in an apartment next to a convenient store. In the dream he is almost paralysed with fatigue and he crosses the intersection and there is a young Asian woman wearing a jean jacket and thick dark makeup with him for whom he feels faint affection and in attempting to enter the store together for him to purchase soda pop and cigarettes they are transported behind the building to their temporary shared residence. They begin at the porch and down the stairs. Ruggles suggest they approach the convenient store from the back and they go through a thicket of thorns as if crossing a frozen lake and he wonders why she is willing to accompany him and they cross into a lot which runs up to an unmarked old two-level structure in which Ruggles is certain great evil occurs and that this young lady has some victim oriented association with it ultimately and he stares at the building standing there with the girl and the governor exits the building wearing a linen robe and blood-spattered slippers and he looks upon Ruggles and gives him a thumbs-up and Ruggles nods uncertainly and takes the girl by the arm on around the side of the convenient store and he enters and she is gone and he goes outside and she is there and he holds the door for her and the store begins closing immediately and suddenly he's standing at the cooler, sliding the plastic door aside and taking two cans of cola from the rack, the others clicking into place behind it, and he goes to the counter and asks for a pack of cigarettes and the man takes them from below the register and places them on the space common to them at the register and Ruggles reaches into his pocket and finds he has no currency with which to make this purchase and he goes to door and the girl is gone and he

returns to the register and asks if there is work he can do or credit and the Pakistani man behind the counter has sad eyes as he shakes his head and returns the items to their places and Ruggles goes outside and the girl is back and she is smoking a cigarette and he asks to take a drag and in reaching out his hand to take the cigarette from her he comes awake in the cell barely and wills himself back to sleep having not fully crossed that invisible perimeter and he is permitted one drag and the girl takes the cigarette back and they walk again the way they came and the man in the robe is being escorted into a limousine and Ruggles and the asian girl are told to stay back for the man's protection and Ruggles looks at the building and the vultures launching on the flat roof and the two rows of rooms all the doors unnumbbered, the building painting in its entirety a utilitarian grey-blue. The roof sagged.

People are killed there, Ruggles said, turning to the girl and not finding her there and trailing on They watch people get killed in there. That's what happens.

And she is neither on his right nor his left and he is standing in the lot looking at the building for a moment longer and he passes on through the lot looking over his shoulder and the man is there in his robe again holding up his thumb at Ruggles his teeth in tremendous display and bloodflecked and Ruggles trips over his feet and hurries on back through the thicket to the front porch of the house he was allegedly boarding in. He enters his room, through no motion or memory of his own, and it is a spartan affair with a twin bed in the corner, a brown wooden bedside table, and various eastern scarfs hung from the walls as decor. He looked out the window at the intersection and turned back and the asian girl was standing there again with him and it was natural and she stood blowing bubbles with her chewing gum and she chewed loudly and scrunched in the back right corner of her jaw and she worked away at it while she studied the room and Ruggles wondered again why she had any iclindation to be near him and he went to speak to her again of something of affection and he awoke in the twilight of dawn, trays having been brought to them, and he asked Mondo what it was and Mondo did not respond and so he climbed down from the bunk and opened the styrofoam contained and fell to eating the chipped beef and bread therein: It was green and warm and he spread it on the bread squinting occasionally out the window which offered not light yet but bright lit razor wire and lights the size of huge speakers booming quadrangles on each of eight inversions off a radial center and all their perimeters. An official officer's vehicle purred in the narrow roadway that ran along the fencing and paused in Ruggles section and he cursed it in his mind and it drove away around a corner.

He ate the rest of the peanut butter with his breakfast spoon and folded up his finished meal package and climbed back up into his bed and slept more and when he slept he was at the intersection with the girl standing there bouncing her little leg beside him and eventually crossing together through tortured and joint motion they entered again the convenient store and she with him this time and Ruggles approaches the counter confidently this time and the man produces the cigarettes again from beneath the counter and places them there and Ruggles looks to the girl for help in the purchase and she has vanished and he is awake again and it is light and all the world's horror is such upon his nerve endings that he feels he has been poisoned with some psychoactive agent by the prison warden and it is this very inversion of his own mother whom he'd had vision of that is the warden of this prison. This woman whom he had loved with

all of his child's heart and upon its breaking with her death was he expelled orphaned and wildhaired into the world, a dark eyed ruminant across a ruined managerial hell.

VII

A season came and went. Ruggles watched the leaves slowly change from yellow to tatterclad to bare branches gnurled alone in high wind. Thanksgiving in jail. The men were locked down for most of the day and when they were let out for dinner they were given heavy styrofoam packs of turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie and the prisoners took these essentially as any other meal, and football played on the dormitory's televisions and each inmate sat in their crude thrones chewing and wondering if some miracle could ever occur. Dinner has ended as soon as it has begun. The red domed light comes on above the bubble and the men are swept through this ruby light back into their cells and the holiday is finished, and the night is thick black on the windows, swimming up and encasing the penitentiary almost amneotically and within the jail men shuffle up and dispose of their styrofoam packets and go automated and tired-eyed across the pod bay floor back to their cells. Ruggles had fallen in with most of the men by now and walked the dorm untroubled and bored. He slouched back over to his cell and the window darkened an hour later and Thanksgiving was over.

Later that evening, a convincing transvestite was pulled yelling by guards across the dorm floor to her cell and shut therein. She kicked the door several times and cursed the guards profoundly, and prisoners stood at their windows looking to eachother, gesturing and shrugging. It was not until the next morning that the transvestite exited her cell in a similar attitude as she was delivered into it, but now having arranged her prison clothes through some witchery of folds and tucks into a white dress and tube top. It was clear that she had undergone hormone treatment of some sort as she had full breasts and a woman's figure and manner and gait. Long metallical painted fingernails waved before her gesticulations like ten wands of counterfeit silver. And when she exited her cell that next morning, it was with a sort crazed lecture of various protestations so loud and profane that the witnessing inmates stood wide-eyed and quite still studying her paroxysm. Two guards soon emerged from the bubble so as to threaten and quiet the transvestite, and she took up her place in the lunch line among the bustling men and told anyone who looked at her to fuck off very aggressively. Ruggles and Wayne stood some persons back in line, watching this wild creature chew unaccountably procured gum and bug her eyes out derangedly at any prisoner who was found to be looking in her direction. She stood in the lunch line with a hand at her hip, and she tapped her foot frenetically and looked about the pod and at the inmates with a sort of accumulating discomfort and impatience growing within her, as such as she could host such a thing, and lunch was spooned out in triplicate across her plate and Ruggles sloped along in the line like things aligned in a funnel and he passed sideward by the inmate workers and was served lunch. Ruggles and Wayne took up across the bay and watched her from afar, for another outburst seemed inevitable. Ruggles watched the transvestite as she took her lunch alone at the far side of one of the long metallic benches, pushing the beans about her paper plate with a bending plastic fork and frowning. Scanning about her. Ruggles looked to the inmates. The prisoners could not seem to reckon themselves to this image so womanly and discordant did she look pitifully placed among these foul men.

Wayne was across from Ruggles, watching his eyeline and chewing. His wild eyes lit up.

Yo that nigga look like a bitch, forreal!
Ruggles laughed and held his hand up in caution.
Wayne, be subtle, man. Subtle.
Wayne put his elbows up on the table and oscillated his head smoothly above his joined fists. He checked over his shoulders and his eyes narrowed on Ruggles and he whispered, That white nigga look like a straight bitch.
Yeah. Okay. You should ask her out on a date then.
Nigga, please.
Ruggles was grinning, chewing.What? You were just saying how much she looked like a lady.
Wayne glanced peripherally about him again and then looked at Ruggles directly and said.
That nigga's got a dick.
Is that right?
Please, nigga. That nigga's got a dick or else that nigga be at the women's jail. That nigga was just wildin' out like a dude. Last night, too.
Ruggles nodded his head and looked across the floor at the tranvestite there sullen with her legs crossed at the steel bench, the plate pushed away from her unconsumed, looking about constantly for insult or confrontation. Ruggles looked back to Wayne. He was still oscillating weirdly above his folded hands like an eyeball above a pyramid and he looked to Ruggles. Eyes glowing mischief. He leaned in confidence across the table toward Ruggles.
You want me get some shit poppin'?
What do you mean?
I mean, get it poppin' nigga.
How?
Like, make shit pop off.
What are you going to do?
Watch.
Ruggles put a hand up.
Wait, what are you going to do.
Wayne nodded and stooped and raised his own hand that it was okay. Ruggles leant back and Wayne looked at him again.
Chill, nigga, I'm-a just get shit poppin'.
Yeah, I heard that. What are you talking about.
Watch, he said, as he did on a sudden stand up from the table and send a cat-calling whistle that swerved upward twice like a siren at the tranvestite, as if she were on fire, and he yelled out, What's up, baby?
Ruggles was mortified.
It was as if Wayne's words had torn some manner of invisible membrane that had heretofore prophylactically sealed off all openly expressed sentiment on the person of the transvestite, and all the inmates it seemed took up likewise at the inaugural slitting of this unpigmented integument. Whistling like huge criminal birds, singing out lewd oaths and propositions. Pounding their tables and laughing and carrying on and addressing the tranvestite from the anonymous white-clothed swirl of the dining inmates. Wayne was grinning hugely as the transvestite stood up and began shouting blindly into the roar of mirth and affected romantic

inducement. Ruggles felt heat rushing through him senselessly. He could hear the transvestite cursing Wayne in particular from the blind reception of his left ear. In this direction, however, he would not look in pitiful attempt to distance himself from the matter. Feigning as if he hadn't perceived a bit of what was unveiling. Through the roaring and fluid paced silence Wayne's young face, with dreadlocks scattered, looked down to him from his invisible pulpit, smiling and eyes glittering. He winked at Ruggles and then, cupping his hands about his mouth on either side for the carrying of his voice, Wayne swung back toward the transvestite and yelled.

Yo, nigga, you gotta dick or what!

A rush of heat and giddiness ran through Ruggles so insane and cavalier was his young friend, who merely took his seat again smiling as if he had just returned from washing his hands. Wayne seemed entirely oblivious, or unaccountably related to, the chaos he had just unleashed across the pod, and any threat of the approaching transvestite, lurching weirdly now across the bay toward him there at the table, seemed lost to him, as well. Shifting this way and that towards this grinning pandemoniac child moreso in accordance with the confines of her outfit than the laws of locomotive movement. She drift weirdly across the white linoleum floor, cursing the group of men in general, working her way toward Wayne. The boy sat rocking back and forth and even smiling at Ruggles and soon there seen hurtling through the air flew a small glossy cardboard house filled with milk. Wayne was looking at Ruggles smiling like a weird black imp when the carton exploded in a constellation of huge white spheres against the side of his head and obloidal cow fluid drenched his visage and skeined down across his chest and arms. The surprise and outrage in his huge whited eyes was such it might as well have been as if Wayne had never seen nor addressed this person in his life before. The prisoners were hooting like apes. Wayne's face was whitewashed with milk in the lurid aspect of some kind of counter minstrel or albino. Wayne swiveled his dripping head, wide eyed and cloaked in skimmed dairy, and he watched with horror as the transvestite lumbered along insanely, yelling. What the fuck did you just ask me, little boy? What did you ask? Ask it again. She spoke in a strange and trembling half-woman's voice.

The guards emerged from the bubble upon seeing the thrown carton of milk and Wayne is now standing up, challenging the transvestite with the most callous assessments of her dubious and crafted feminity. Ruggles sat stunned, giddy with secret laughter, as these two crazed voices, from these two crazed creatures, sliced thinly through air above him, and a moment later she is dragged by the arms backwards to her cell, still protesting, and Wayne was told by one of the guards to return to his cell and he shrugged at Ruggles. This small melted candle with a hundred dreadlocks for wicks. The guard stood at his side, waiting for him to gather up his dinner things, and perform the whole of the order and Wayne winked to Ruggles and said, Told you I'd get it poppin', my nigga!

He sighed histrionically rolling his eyes up at the guard and rose along to the performance of the guard's guiding hand and took his plate to the trashcan and was escorted back to his cell and the red light glowed to buzzing life above the pod's bubble a moment later, and Ruggles trotted off to his cell. Mondo was seated on the bunk, his face looked as he were engaged in some manner of transmorphic process with what appeared on the television screen. He pulled his knees back automatically for Ruggles to pass.

Ruggles went to the stool as he had for the past month and he played with his hands and picked at the paint peeling from the desk, and he swiveled and absently watched television with Mondo. It was a procedural drama in which a blind woman solved various crimes. Mondo stared at the screen with huge goggling eyes in a sort of total immersion with the images. He shook himself free of the television's hypnagogic clutch and glanced over at Ruggles furtively and disorient, and he stood from the bunk and slid the bent plastic spoon and the folded paper packet from his breast pocket. Mondo sloped over by where Ruggles was set on the stool and he stole under the television like some kind of crazed raccoon for his empty soda bottle, and he set the spoon upon beside the television set. Ruggles watched.

How much do you pay for that?

Mondo looked from the sink at Ruggles as if the question had just woken him from sleep.

What choo mean?

I mean, for the dope.

Mondo took the bottle from the sink and filled the spoon with a gentle and slurred tinking, and he dropped the film in this miniature bird bath. A toothpick he had scavenged from some long dusty roll through the corridors of the jail hung from his lower lip, and this he took and meticulously stirred the solution in the spoon with. He looked again at Ruggles skeptically. Eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

Why joo asking me this question? How much.

Ruggles leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. I'm asking for me.

Joo mean you want buy this?

Ruggles leant back in the stool and scratched the side of his neck. Yeah.

Mondo's eyes lit up and then shifted visibly to a sort of affected forestalling disposition behind which he calculated in frenzied one-sided euchre, and he lifted the spoon to his nose and snuffed the solution back into his sinus cavity. He checked his face in the shaving mirror that had been taped above the sink in opaque reflection. He ground his teeth and his eyes rolled as if unhinged from their optic nerves, and his movements sped up for a moment before slowing considerably. He bobbed back from the sink and set down on the bunk. He looked over at Ruggles, eyes thick with distortion and narcotically recalibrated. His jaw hung partially slack and his three front teeth jet out prominently. He sat up suddenly a bit, as if to some new perceptual system of attention, and he held his chin with his right hand as a priest might, his left arm propping up the elbow of his right arm. He addressed Ruggles.

Why joo ask me this, how much?

Because I'm attempting to purchase some. What. Are you trying to get me recorded saying it or some shit?

He leant forward and turned down the television. Why joo think I recording you?

I'm fucking around.

Who told joo this? Mondo asked suddenly screwing his face up and leaning close in toward Ruggles.

Told me what? Ruggles said, backing his head away.

Who told joo I record you?

Ruggles laughed and held his hand up inoffensively at Mondo. He had learned to dulcorate the man by this point with gestures and device, as one might learn to manipulate the controllable whims of a dangerous animal. Ruggles spoke.

No, man. It was a joke. Forget it.

The crazed hispanic on the bed rubbed his temples and shut his eyes and sway lightly where he sat on the edge of the bunk. He opened his eyes and cast them upon the form of Ruggles.

Joo see Ruggles. Sometimes maybe I want forget things. Sometimes very much. But maybe I no can. And sometimes maybe I want remember something very much. And then I forget it. Where I look for it. Inside of me. It is gone. The answer. Where did it go? Faces even. Now joo tell me to forget this joke. It's. It's. Uncertain if I can do this or where this. Memory. Will go. Joo understand?

Ruggles shook his head and got up from the stool as Mondo spoke and climbed up into his bunk. He could hear the thrum of the building's massive airconditioning units. He could hear timed buzzers drone hard and snap and he could hear automated doors sliding and men pacing and kicking their doors in other dorms. And he could hear the distant clink of chains and manacles on those being ushered between dorms or returning from court. He rolled to the wall and closed both eyes. He opened one eye and studied the white painted brick. The cell was cold during the day and hot at night. He took his arms and brought them up through the short sleeves of his oversized jail scrubs and he hugged his bare chest and rolled back across the bunk facing the television. He shut his eyes tightly and opened one, and through one squinting eyeball did he see Mondo's head rise suddenly from out of the bottom bunk like some paranoid chelonian ebberman aggravatedly scuttling up some muddy slope to glance for passerbys before casting his line again into the cloudy water below. He looked upwards at Ruggles as if they were beginning an entirely new interaction. Like a creature crawling out of a dark hole in the ground. All these generations of men born and in wait for the materialization of what eidolon. It has come and gone already.

What joo doing up there?

Nothing, just talking with you. Listening to you.

Daytime thunder cracked from far off over the hills on yonder outside and both men looked to the back of the cell as if the disturbance had manifested and dissolved therein. Ruggles could see from his matted perch empurpled storm clouds swirling in a synchronized spiral of diffluence across the flagging mango afternoon sky. Thunder cracked again and it rippled thrumming across the skyline and lightning ran in a glowing blue tear from the heavens and their whitewashed stone cell warped at once into a purple convolution that slowed perception and perhaps time itself. A moment later a constellaton of huge spheroidal droplets of rainwater slapped heavily against window with such force and quantity it was as if their cell was set sideways in the rocky crags beneath a waterfall. Rain fanned at the window like a liquid peacock, and the cell darkled as clouds overtook the exhausted copper colored sun on the horizon.

Mondo emerged from his bunk and moved towards the window like some kind of mythic troll whom the rain was calling home above which Ruggles must lay his head. He spoke from the window.

Why joo asking me forget this joke? Maybe I cannot do this. Maybe I can.

Ruggles sighed and turned onto his back and put his hands behind his head on the pillow and spoke to the ceiling. Yeah, man, I think it's going to be alright, though. Eventually.
Mondo shrugged and he returned to the bunk a moment later where troll like again he disappeared into his bunk and reemerged a moment later and set himself on the bunk and spun his head up like an owl and looked at Ruggles, who had been watching him from above.
Joo want to get high?
Ruggles propped himself up on an elbow. That's what I was asking you.
Mondo stood up from the bunk again and put his arms on the topmost bunk and he looked side to side as if there could be another in their cell with whom caution should be used on this subject, and he spoke to Ruggles, saying, Joo know this not peanut butter, right?
Yeah.
Joo liking the peanut butter I sold. Do you remember this peanut butter?
I do. Yes.
Joo liking the peanut butter so maybe joo liking the drogas, too. Mondo shrugged to himself.
Basically that's what I'm thinking, Ruggles said, as Mondo started pacing the three or four steps from the cell door to the window and back. The rain was torrential and so thick upon the windows was it as to give an impression of absolute night. Mondo, pacing, flashed a look up at Ruggles.
Joo having monies?
On my books, yeah.
Maybe I tell joo a story first and then we return to this question. Mondo held his hands behind him with a sort of regal and sophisticated air now, as if lecturing for an audience, as he paced. A hard pock of lightning struck the corner of yard outside of their cell window and in a great blue distortion of sound and damson light were they suspended and requantized into their respective positions inside of the cell.
Maybe I tell joo a story and then we deal with this next subject. Drogas.
Sure.
Maybe I tell joo a story about how I come here one time. Not this time. But other time. When I was younger. I tell you this story Ruggles, because you ask me forget and you speak of wanting drogas. I tell you. Okay. There was man. See, I grow up poor. There no monies for nothing. You going to kitchen. I'm small boy. There is nothing. Little boy want toy for birthday. He does not get it. And so forth. He look to his mother. He is small boy. She take men in her bedroom. Many of them. And liquor she drink all the time. So. There is not monies for this small boy. There is not nothing it seems. This boy go to school. He is hungry. No one care. He stop going to school. No one care. He maybe try drink like mother and no one care. Joo know who this boy is, Ruggles?
Ruggles was uncertain whether or not he ought to reveal that he knew Mondo to be speaking about himself.
Well, was it you?
Mondo's insane face lit up as if Ruggles had emerged through something impenetrable, his head finding Mondo there on the other side.
That's right, homes! I been talking to you this whole time about me homes.
That's wild I got it right, Ruggles said.

Mondo nodded and agreed that it was wild that Ruggles guessed it correctly and he went on pacing. So this little boy. Joo understand this me, now, but joo still listen. So. This little boy. He sees older man. He sees him coming and going from apartments and he driving nice car and this man wear suits and leather shoes and his hair is combed. He is white man. He has many monies, the little boy thinks. And the little boy asks who the man is and he is told that this man is owner of the apartment building and so after some time he watch schedule of this man and he make plan to rob this man. He has many monies, the little boy thinks. And so the next time he see this man's car, he wait until man is out of sight and he open car door and pop trunk and little boy get inside and close door and soon zoom zoom zoom they are driving to this place, driving to that place, the little boy in the back they zoom zoom all around. Almost rest of day. The man is busy man. He go many places. Many times the car start and drive and stop and he leave and little boy wait and lie there. The boy is probably twelve. Thirteen. But little boy wait in trunk and more zoom zoom and finally little boy hear garage door opening and car pull inside and joo hear nothing. And it's colder. It's colder because the sun can no longer touch the car directly and little boy know he is in garage of home with maybe many monies. And so after sometime he pull latch in trunk and he get out and little boy see another nice car in the garage and he see baseball bat and golf club and bicycle and little boy see skateboard and toy and sports drink. Little boy take from sports drink and wait in garage many hours, looking out garage window waiting for dark and for middle of night.

Like the end of a bull whip at their ears did the thunder crack again outside and their images were superscribed chromatically upon the six walls of the cell and upon eachother's forms. Rain washed in rhythmic flashes upon the plexiglass windowpane behind the metal grating and the wind sung out wailing a high whine and the light in the cell flickered out and the jail was silent and endarkened for a moment and the inmates held their breath and a pregnant moment later was there a great whirring and the electricity was running again and the bulb embrightened and Mondo went to the cell window and checked to see if Ruggles was listening and he continued to pace in the manner of a teacher or priest or scribe speaking amid the torn and meek in the square of some medieval town. He went on.

Joo see Ruggles. Little boy make plan. And he follow this. So little boy sit drinking gatorades and peeing in shoes in garage and so forth and soon it is very late and little boy know it is time for plan and so he go inside through garage and when he go inside he bring baseball bat from garage with him.

Uh huh, Ruggles said. What happened?

Well, Mondo said, house is very dark and little boy is not scared but he cannot see and there are dark shapes and he see rich man is sleep on couch and TV is playing loudly and many bottles of beer and liquor around him and he wear full suit still except his tie and so little boy go upstairs and as he is going upstairs watching this man someone is on stairs with him and so he swings this bat and it cracks. It cracks against skull and this make disgusting sound and little boy see woman in long white pajama dress broken then at bottom of stairs and little boy sits and watches man from top of stairs and he does not wake up and the woman. Woman is not moving now at bottom of stairs. So little boy go into one room and he finds child's room. There is no monies. He goes into another room. It is for baby, ninos, joo know? No monies. He open third door and he finds where he think monies. Little boy take pillowcase off pillow and he fill this with woman

jewelry and watches from man and he find money in drawers and money beneath mattress and little boy go creep creep creep back out of room to top of stairs and man is still not awake and woman is not awake and so he go downstair with bag and he walks past man there on the couch and he go into the kitchen. He open refrigerator and it is full. It has milk and cake and turkey and fruit and cheese and little boy take this cake from the refrigerator and this milk and he sit and he eat this and he drink all of this milk and then little boy see small girl, she maybe, five, six years old. She is with woman at bottom of stairs and she is crying and yelling to father. I am frozen. I am remember. Remember the little boy is me. So little boy is frozen looking at this young girl and waiting for man to come around corner and get him and little boy watches the girl cry. She cry much. And yell. And man does not wake. I think God has made this path for me, that this man does not wake. Instead. Joo see. Girl. Girl come running into kitchen and she ask me who I am and if I can help her mommy. She not know I hit her mommy with the bat. She not even threaten policia. She just ask who I was and if I could help her mother. I ask her for car keys and I take pillowcase and drive and I get lost very quickly and police cars come many of them and I keep driving though many of them and I not driving much before this so maybe not best driver joo say and little boy crash the car and officer grab him and bring him to jail. But not this jail. Little boy goes to jail with children. They say he kill some woman. I no remember killing any woman. We bump into eachother I swing bat woman fall down stairs. That's all. I no kill anybody this time but they say little boy kill woman. So little boy stay in this jail for weeks and goes to court and joo know what the judge say?

What, Ruggles said, watching Mondo speak, taking his three measured steps to the door and back. The storm outside carried on like some kind of frenzied assault of weathers and there was a high whine from the wind and water chugging off the dripstone and through the gutters alongs the tin roof's perimeter and down the slats of angular steel and splashing off the razor wire.

The judge say, joo not having basic respect for human life. Joo not having basic respect for human life this judge say. This man, this rich man, the man with many monies. He stand up and joo know what he say?

What?

He say, joo not having basic respect for human life. And he cry this man. He owns this building and he very busy and zoom all over town and he here now crying in courtoom. He cry for his wife. He bring two children to stand with him. He had to hold one of them. I see daughter again crying. They all crying. The judge ask me if I want speak and I said yes and I asked, where is my mother, and the judge and the family. No one understand why I ask this. But I not see my mother anywhere in courtroom. Why I ask this. And soon I go jail long time. Kid jail. When I become young man, I leave this kid jail. But I stay in this kid jail for many years. And one day I am there. I no have visitors never. I have visitor guard says. I never having visitors. Guard says you have visitor. And he brings me. And it is this man. This rich man. He is sitting in room crying when I walk in. He hugs me this man. He tell me he forgive me. This man say he forgive me for what I do to his wife. Joo know why I tell you this story?

Ruggles squinted and rearranged himself on the bed, propped at the elbow.

I can't say I'm sure yet.

Mondo snapped his fingers in front of him and sloped back and forth across the narrow passage from cell door to window.

Joo are like this man. Is why I tell you story. Joo tell me why this man come many years later and tell me he forgive me and hug me and blah blah blah?
I guess he had. Some kind of breakthrough or something, Ruggles said.
Mondo shook his head no and his eyes goggled like two pupiled eggs vibrating out of his head.
This man, he do this because he believe, but he does not know, he believe it will bring his wife back. He does not know that this why he do it. But this is why he do it. He try to get wife back through hug me. She not come back. She not coming back. Man hug me all day and cry and love and forgive and I cannot make her appear. This interaction with this man. It make me very uncomfortable. It very embarassing, much crying, much saying he love me and these kind of thing. And I no give back people wives. I no make them inside me or with magic. And I no need no this man so this very uncomfortable. Joo asking me for drogas. I sell drogas before I come here, too. With drogas sometimes men become like this rich man. They want beg and cry and to another man for drogas. He no having drogas at that time. He no make drogas. He no having nothing for this man and many other men. But all these men and women they beg like this. To me. When I sell drogas. Like. Like their begging will make the drogas appear or make the drogas appear faster. And it does nothing. It does nothing. Joo understand it does not make drogas?
Yeah, Ruggles said.
So I give you some drogas today and let's say in two days or two weeks you want drogas again and I no having none for you. See I cannot bring dead wives back to life. I cannot make this drogas appear neither. And I needing this more than you. So maybe joo saying you need drogas very badly, crying to me. I have nowhere to go away from you. And this very uncomfortable for me. You are man thinking he found peace but coming to jail crying to me because he really try bring wife out of grave. Or maybe I give you drogas and you no pay like joo said you were gonna pay me. That would mean I would have to hurt joo and joo would probably be begging for drogas that I can't make appear the whole time and after. So it would all be very uncomfortable for me, joo understand?
I've paid for everything I've bought from you, Ruggles said.
But with drogas, this is different. This is like man's wife. You sell man drogas. He want cry to you for them one day when you no having nothing and this is inevitable. He is not this way with other items. I sell you peanut butter. I sell you chocolate sometime, right? I sell you soda pop. You no never crying to me for these things, begging, disgusting. This sight, it make me sick, inside of my stomach, joo know? Men no do this when grocery store close. When barber shop close for day. Men no cry outside of it. Break in. Shoot guns. Bang. Bang. Joo see with drogas, they cannot believe it is not there. They are like this man. See he is same in court as when he see me in jail. This man believe he yell blah blah blah at me in court, maybe his wife come back to life. This man believe he hug me. Forgive me. Zap! Maybe his wife appear back in his home. I don't know. But this not happen, and I am just stand uncomfortable both times. I am young man and there is crying older man. But maybe one day you think hug me or cry me. That this will bring drogas when you want them. This very uncomfortable for me, joo understand?
Yeah, Ruggle said. He raised his hand to indicate to Mondo that he was exiting the bunk and Mondo stopped pacing and stood by the toilet and Ruggles slid off the mat and his white rubber soles smacked on the floor and he took up at the stool by the window, by the storm, tucking his arms again inside the short sleeves of the prison uniform for warmth. He was sat like a sort of

white cotton frog there with the water splashing against the window behind him. He leaned forward and asked.
Well, how much is it?
Mondo was at the sink with his bottle. Joo asking me how much for what?
For the dope, Ruggle said.
Mondo looked up crazily at him from the sink and came over and sat on his bunk.
I tell you one more thing. I tell you I sell some drogas. This maybe two years ago. Before I come back here last. Maybe I sell some drogas then, too. And this man's daughter. I never forget her face. And later, I see her in car many times. Older now, but same face. Her boyfriend buying drogas from me. She always with him. I see her in car. They always buying drogas. I come up to car. They buy. She does not recognize me. Soon she come by herself. No more boyfriend. She no saying nothing. She no recognize me. She buy many drogas and carry on this way long time. I no see her since courtroom. And this many years ago. I small boy then. But small boy only know a few faces before he start in and out of jail. And he remember. Maybe little boy even want forget girl's face. I no remember. It's not important. But maybe she see many faces in her life and forget my face in this many. But I remember and see this man's daughter. One day she come to me. I no having drogas. She beg and cry at door to house. She start screaming. I tell her I no having drogas this day. She no leaving. She sit on sidewalk and first she cry for drogas and this very loud for me. This make very suspicious for my business. I go outside and tell her she must go. And then she start crying. She start crying to me for her mother. She grab my leg and she take her breast out in street and she tell me she suck dick for drogas. Then she cry again for mother very loud and this digust me very much and I kick her away from me like dog. I tell her I no having drogas and I no bring dead mothers back to life. She like her father, joo see?
Someone whooped out from one of the other cells and clapped a few times and it carried across the pod bay floor and off the three opposing walls. The men looked to the door and rain sloshed at the window of their cell behind them. Ruggles looked at Mondo.
Yeah, Ruggles said, I see.
So joo see why I hesitant to sell you something? Maybe joo think you suck dick or you cry and pull my leg, Poof. Drogas here. And I cannot get away or kick you away like dog. And I cannot bring jore dead back to life.
That's not in me, Ruggle said, and he drew his knees up into his actual shirt and in the storm darkened cell on the stool he appeared to be levitating in a white cotton chrysalis.
What's not in joo? Mondo turned and asked, one hand cupping his chin and the other held out ponderously toward Ruggles.
To beg at a man's foot. For anything, Ruggles said. Rain struck the window in great whipping lashes and the splash and clatter of cloudwater stippled their talk. Mondo stopped pacing and sat on the bunk. He looked at the Ruggles with demented eyes and he appeared to be trembling though he smile.
Joo no thinking this inside you, nowheres?
It's not in me, Ruggles said. Not for drugs, at least. He hugged his knees inside his stretched shirt and rocked his weight lightly on the stool. The cell was colder than usual. It smelled of Mondo's deodorant. Ruggles shuddered.
Did you ever see that girl again?

Mondo looked up and over at Ruggles as if shook from a trance by the question.
I no remember. I see many customers. Why joo asking me this?
I don't know, said Ruggles. He slipped his knees out of his shirt and stood and Mondo tucked his legs closer to the bed for his passage and he went to the cell door and peered out the window. There was nothing on the tables on the dormitory floor. He could see the pod's television from his cell and he saw a woman standing in front of a map pointing to various expressions of orange and red and neon green distributed across it. He leaned back against the cell door. He stretched his arms up over his head and then he leant over and let his arms hang, arms dangling nearly to his feet. Stiff frame enselphurchured alive. The blood rushed to his head and he stood for a moment and the world tunneled away in profound darkness and he forgot his balance and his name and preferences and he came to standing and trembling. There was dust along the grey painted floor's perimeter and Ruggles toed it with his sneaker and Mondo watched from his bunk, the shifting light from the television gathering and flickering at the glimmer of his lower eyelids.
Joo having the monies with you?
Ruggles shook his head.
Es fifteen dollars a packet, Mondo said and he shook the folded paper out of his breast pocket. Ruggles stepped back across the cell and faced him on the stool. The rain was waning at the window and the slightest grey sunlight pierced through clouds in a state of dissolution and wild accumulation that to Ruggles, upon turning around, they looked like like gigantic seeding dandelions suspended in a swirling water. He looked back to Mondo.
I can put the money on your books, or get you fifteen dollars worth of commissary. How many packets do you need?
Joo need one. With his thumb and forefinger he extracted with dexterity a small rectangular sheet of orange film scored into six squares. He held it out in his palm to Ruggles. His head hovered above the palm weirdly and the three teeth of his upper jaw shew from his slack lips.
Ruggles leaned in to inspect the packet. He looked to the square and then he looked up to Mondo. I'm not doing the whole spoon routine. I'll just scarf it.
Joo gonna do the spoon.
No. I'm just gonna scarf it.
Es better with spoon.
I'm sure it is, Ruggles said, extending his palm out and putting it beside Mondo's hand. With a slight movement Mondo tilted his cupped palm and the almost weightless sheet slid from the man's damp palm and it flipped and float a moment in the air and sway into Ruggles palm. He turned and set in on the desk. He perforated the tabs along the center and took three and brought them up to his tongue and Mondo watched as if Ruggles was giving some kind of performance and when he stood and went to the sink and washed them down Mondo was still watching him, smiling. The rain had ceased and muted sunlight lay at the windowpane in the back of the cell, doubling the pocked grating in relief onto the desk in soft white that warped, too, across the bunk and part of Mondo's face and leg.
Joo gonna be high.
Okay, Ruggle said. He looked out the cell door again at the pod bay floor. He looked back.
You know what time it is?

Mondo gestured strangely at the television and flicked his head likewise in that direction. He looked again at Ruggles.
Joo said what?
What time is it, Ruggles said.
Okay, Mondo said and he reached forward and turned the television back up. His mouth went slack and his eyes goggled and corruscated with the doubled image of the screen and he was ensorceled almost at once, eyelids lowering and raising arbitrarily. His teeth grinding. Ruggles sloped in his direction and he pulled his knees in and Ruggles took up at his stool and a warmth arose glistering within him at the lower back and the nape of the neck. This limpid fluid relief washed, too, through the horrored and frenetic corridors of his mind and his eyes lowered and he sat as if in slow motion and articulation became him in particle and in source and afternoon sunlight was at the window and upon his back, and the sun was setting now, overcome, and a great dew was in a conference of deliquium with the pink tinted crepuscular sky and a rainbow arched over the hills at the horizon where the lighthouse stood and a light spun and flipped on the top of the lighthouse in the wind and the murmur of birds began again shaking from out of their crooks and their nests and tangles of branches and hair and litter and Ruggles turned away from the television softly and set his vision upon this scene through the droplets upon the pane and like some etheomaniacal covenant he understood he must leave this place forever no matter what the indignity or concession with the world and that to be imprisoned is to be buried alive and this alone. That the cell devoted more room to lying down than to movement confirmed this impression to him and he glanced over his shoulder at the cell and Mondo's eyes were in glimmering frequency with the television and the walls were dusty toward the ceiling and he stare again out the window through the grating and Mondo occasionally looked over at the back of his head and Ruggle's eyes opened and closed softly and slowly on the active twilight and the last clouds were substantial and white and through them birds tunneled and angled and checked and swooped over the jail and seagulls from the coastline a mile east of the prison swung out over the razor wire and rushed in waves through the pink twilight back over the factories and the boxwoods lining the far road out of the penitentiary, and soon the buzzer indicated evening chow and recreation and Mondo sprang and caught the door, leaving it opened, and the two slack shapes drift out from where they were emmewed and went floating englossed across the cafeteria floor and Mondo is walking at his right one moment and as if through teleportation Ruggles looks again and Mondo is beside the cart already angling with the podman handing out cups of jello. The transvestite was suddenly at his side.
You're different, she said. I can tell. You're educated.
She had blackened her eyes with pen and outlined her lips and in a knot did she have her prison top beneath the ribs, her midrift bare, and Ruggles looked upon her and then looked around and the men were taking this in, as well. He did not care. He did not care about any of these men. He had seen and suffered among them and they were of some kind of lower order generally speaking. He looked at the bald white man with the tattoos and the pear shaped head. They met eyes for a moment and the man looked back to his council of three other men now. They were low bred. Something common among them. Their foreheads. And unlikeable. Disposed to outbursts and violence and obsessed with respect and with their rules alone. Ruggles looked and there was toilet paper over Wayne's cell window so he was using the first part of chow to use the

toilet while his cellmate fetched dinner. Ruggles looked back at the transvestite. She gave the impression of being drenched with water.
I have a doctorate, Ruggles said. Just got it.
I knew it, she said, advancing in the line with him. A few men hooted and whistled and Ruggles waited apprehensively for the transvestite to retaliate but she ignored them and carried on. Someone yelled Ruggles got a girlfriend and Ruggles turned and winked amicably at the man who had said it and the man laughed.
That little fuck you were sitting with is a real prick, she said.
He didn't mean it, Ruggles said. It's just for the chaos of it.
I know, she said. Why are you in here, Mr. Doctorate?
My name's Ruggle. And it's some kind of misunderstanding.
Candy, and what kind of understanding?
Even narcoticized, Ruggles could not bring himself to speak about his case to anyone while incarcerated so convinced was he that there were confederates among them working for the police that would inculpate him no matter what version of the story he gave and so he told each this and prevaricated although some knew, as Mondo had read his paperwork, but confide he could not in the person of the transvestite. As they passed before the three men, they were each given two hot dogs, a slop of beans, and then handed an apple and mustard packets by the third man. Ruggles could not believe the extent to which he coveted food and how the ejecta he had been limited to heretofore while incarcerated had followed him literally into his dreams. He thought of nothing but soda pop and coffee and he dreamt of cake and baking cookies and enormous fluffs of sourdough and creamed butter and salt or honey and looking at the plate he had been handed he stopped listening for a moment to the transvestite, so lost was he in dejection that there was no dessert, and floating alongside she walked womanlike and spoke womanlike and Ruggles saw her eyes blue and the glasswork of her face and felt sympathy for this creature torn between worlds, though she ask for none and would curse Ruggles himself for it altogether and they sat and Wayne emerged from his cell and looked at Ruggles. His eyes protuberated as if pushed outward from within when he saw Ruggles sitting there with the transvestite, and Ruggles watched as the boy actually rubbed both eyes and moved twice his dreadlocks from his face to be sure. He walked over. Both watched his approach.
The fuck is all this shit about, mane! This nigga gay.
Men were watching. Eating their hotdogs or taking a few bites and throwing out their trays and returning to their cells to lie down, watching in passage.
Shut up, Ruggles said to Wayne. Get your chow and come sit down. I apologized for you.
Wayne bounced uncertainly at the edge of the table like a puppy not yet trained away from the scent of his master's plate.
What, Ruggles.
This nigga gay as fuck.
Hey, I'm sitting right here, she said with a slight wave.
Wayne looked astonished, as if staggered that Candy could even perceive his person. He looked at her and then to Ruggles and he looked to the men watching him and swept off to the dinnercart and returned with his head lowered and sat dramatically placed at a distance on Ruggles side.

I'll eat with this gay nigga, but I ain't finna sit on this nigga lap, he told Ruggles, chewing, a bit of food orbiting out of his smacking lips.
What's your name, she asked Wayne.
It's Wayne, bitch. What choo looking at? Ruggles held a palm up to him between them.
Ruggles, this nigga weird as fuck.
Ruggles shook his head and looked at the transvestite and she appeared not to care and he did not care nor did he care to mediate the interaction of these two for he was tired of these men and these derelicts and he carried on eating for a moment and then leant over to Wayne.
I've got a surprise for you.
Wayne leaned in with familiarity, What is it, homie?
Ruggles pushed his plate away and stood up and said he was going to try to use the telephone. Wayne looked up at him pleadingly as if standing in the bottom of a pit out of which Ruggles had just scrambled. Ruggles shrugged and laughed and warmth drove him through the clamor of men and their reptilian eyes and toward the phone and the disembodied voice of his father and strict judgment and skepticism and threats and apologies and promises and father or no father be this they who would release me from this confinement God willing for these men and their ways are not for me and too much sin I've seen.
Tomorrow?
I might be able to get it done tomorrow, the voice said. If this is some kind of game, I'm bringing you right back there, I swear to God.
What kind of fucking game are you talking about? The game of bailing out of jail?
Very nice, that's great. Cursing like that, you sound very sophisticated.
I'm in jail, Dad.
I have to the get a cashier's check from the bank. Ruggles, if you run off or something.
Tell me if you think that sounds like a decision that I would decide to make.
I don't know anymore, Ruggles.
If you can get the cashiers check in the morning, Ruggles said, they could process me for bail at midnight.
I'll see if it I can get it done.
Ruggles return to this cell and he swallowed the remaining three squares and soft he slept until noon the next day when he awoke to the intercom in his cell saying, bag and baggage, pack your belongings, Harrogate, and he sprang up and gathered up his effects and blankets and every atomic part of his person was rushing with impatience and his eyes were bleary with fatigue like Mondo's squinting up from his bed at the rushing and swarming late morning wraith. They had slept through breakfast and lunch and men were out on the pod bay floor at recreation. The sun was orange and bright and Mondo's form was lit up and Ruggles walked to his bedside and extended a hand and the men shook hands and exchanged false promise and Ruggles, with his bedding and papers and bible, walked over to the bubble. Wayne at his side like a scuttlefish for his destination and Ruggles said, Transfer, and said he'd see him soon and saw his face fall in sadness and he put his free arm around the boy and said he'd see him soon and they, too, shook hands in false promise as Ruggles was led out of the dorm and taken downstairs to exit processing, where he sat with four other men in foul blue painted cell. All paced and complained in their city clothes, waiting for the warden to sign off on their bails. They waited all the rest of

that morning. They waited all afternoon. The four men lay or stand in various postures and changed positions in variance like some kind of living tableau of the degenerate impatient. At midnight, they were told to stand and the warden called the men one by one out of the holding cell by their surname. Each man signed his bail conditions and was handed any non-contraband items with which they were arrested. The men were aligned again before a large grey steel door with a guard on either side of them. A button was pushed from behind the desk and a buzzer droned and the door snapped to action and when it opened, the men were told to push by the guard at their front and the guard in the back herded them thus in a single file line down a narrow and bright-lit hallway and out another steel door that led outside of the jail. Each man snuffed the freezing night air into his nostrils and they, the four of them, stood about impatiently as the guard at the fore called them again, one by one, outside of the front gate. Ruggles was called last and, certain that they would stop him and return him to his cell, he sloped up the walk cautiously with his head down and through the crossing at the gate back into the world.

VIII

No ride await him there, no carriage, no car, no horsedrawn cart. See him now. Freezing city. Cold stars. Smell of rain and reek of trash. Crumbling and dark archways. Bridges slick with rainwater. Cement underfoot and bats clustered in the rafters like a thousand black bananas. A liquor store and a neon sign. A broken sideview mirror lay in the crook of the street's curb and passing over this Ruggles saw himself in a hundred spectrophobic jagged and granular variations. He passed through these and other images and shivered in the thin garments he had been arrested in. Broken glass and receipts and bottles. A few rats conferred in a choked whine and tumbled out across his path on the sidewalk, dropping down onto the street and dragging their slick bellies along the pavement. On the outskirts of the city he could see the variegated automata of commerce flash and blink therein. A light rain fell and Ruggles could see his breath in the air as he walked. Some hundred yards up was a man who had been released before him, half-jogging in shorts and a tee-shirt through the freezing night. When they were in the holding cell together, this man had said to Ruggles that you could drop him off at the end of the planet and he would find the nearest place to abandon his sobriety on foot before sleeping that night. There was a bridge in the distance and across the bridge the city sat looking like some kind of blown glass structure within which the crescent moon hung chalk grey and muted. The liquor store was to his right now. A short inbred man that had been in the holding cell with him who smelled of nothing more nor less than human shit stood in the front of the store smoking a slender cigar. He had a flat small head and thick black matted hair like a chimpanzee, grown the same upon his head as his arms. There was a red sign behind him that outlined the letters ATM. Ruggles nodded as he neared him and he shivered and quickened his step and jogged up the few stairs to the front of the store next to the man.

They let you use the phone inside?

Sure did.

How'd you get the cigar?

I stole it.

Ruggles looked out at the ragged city accumulating at their feet in homologues of stone and glass. He looked back to the man.

Do you have a ride out of this place?
Sure do.
Which way are you headed? Ruggles asked.
The man gestured weirdly with his cigar indicating perhaps the overhanging roof of the liquor store beneath which they now stood. Ruggles shook his head and shuddered in his jacket.
I need a ride.
Where to?
However far you can take me out of the city.
It's my pal driving. You'll have to ask him.
Thanks, Ruggles said. We'll see. I've got nothing else.
He stood beside the man there a moment longer and they were soon harried out of the entryway by the store's owner back into the street's green and red flickering streets. They walked together around the corner of the store and stood hunched in their jackets waiting. Ruggles said nothing to the man. He stood beside him shivering. The man's face was halflit from a streetlamp at their side and the light struck his face at an angle enubilating his harelip and one of his small cruel eyes. Water suddenly fanned up from the curb and splashed Ruggles and headlights slowed to a stop before them cutting beams of yellow-white light through which the rain danced. The passenger window rolled down and the driver gave a whoop to the rank man from the holding cell and he reached across to open the passenger door. Ruggles couldn't make him out in the dark of the sputtering black sedan. Music was blaring from the car's radio. One could hear nothing. The small man hopped down and got into the front seat as Ruggles jogged around to the driver's side. The rain was picking up now noticeably and his clothes were damp and cold upon his skin. The driver looked up at him with one red-rimmed eye and lowered the window a half an inch. He was a black man in his fifties. He had no teeth to speak of and appeared to open only the one eye. So rent and filthy were his clothing and person that he appeared to have recently burst forth clutching out of the earth from his own or some other grave. Ruggles put his hands on the roof the car and squinted up at the street ahead of them. The driver shut the radio off with his free hand.
Think you can bring me a few miles up the road?
The driver nodded uncertainly with his one slack eyeball and Ruggles said, Thank you, and tried the back passenger door and it was locked and he felt a mechanical shift within the car's frame and he gripped the handle again and it yielded and he lowered himself into the backseat. The car peeled off before the door had shut all the way behind him and the city lights bled across the glass of the windscreen and windows. They came to a stoplight before the highway and the driver handed the inbred man in the front passenger seat the bottle of liquor and greedily he drunk from this, grinning after and cradling the bottle close to him there. The car smelled of stale cigarettes and the man from the holding cell. The driver did not appear to take note of the man's smell. He, in fact, appeared to take great joy in the company of this rank simian degenerate. They tilted up the exit ramp onto the highway and, accelerating, the horizon was black all about them and black flowers of smoke lain invisible in the dark of their tracks from the failing exhaust. Ruggles leant forward from the backseat. The springs creaked beneath him.
Think you can drop me around the Gehessen county line?
Close, the man said, we goins that away.

How close?
I said we wasa going that aways.
How about the exit at Canal and Park?
The driver just nodded once downward. Rain skittered up from the dark highway and Ruggles watched it spatter upon the lower part of his window and he watched as the droplets were dragged rightward and trembling with the wind and he watched as this man in the passenger seat gave out a great curdled burp and both of the men in the front laughed heartily and the driver patted the inbred man on the back, whether to burp him more or as an act of affection Ruggles was uncertain, but the man did not burp again. Ruggles covered his nose with the sleeve of his coat. He watched dust or soil or some such thing spill off the shoulder of the man driving and float moonlight down toward him through the air menacingly as they jarred over a slight lip of cement on the highway. Scenery became familiar. Ruggles saw the bare steel point of a hypodermic needle tink behind the passenger seat in a flash of road light. The men conferenced and tittered in the front but Ruggles could not make out their words nor did he care to so repulsed was he by everything within and without him in that moment seated and speeding down the highway. He noticed some kind of brown colloidal mass on the seat beside him. It caught the lights overhanging the highway and they whooshed through the cuboidal sheet and he watched it glistening and it jiggled inexplicably there in the cradle of the opposite backseat. There were fast food bags and beer cans at Ruggles feet and he searched nervously for anything worse than that. The man in the front passenger seat turned around slowly and regarded Ruggles. He was visibly drunk already and his eyes drifted in separate orbit and he drooled. His eyes corrected and they narrowed on Ruggles, barely holding their center.
You. You jidn't want to be in that holding cell with me. I think he's an asshole, Warthog.
Whoa, Ruggles said, Hold up now. I didn't want to be in that holding cell. Period. Nothing against you.
The passenger looked at him with his demented and microcephalic expression, his little eyes spun nastily set deep in his compacted face. Still looking at Ruggles, he tapped the driver's right arm with the back of his hand.
I think he think he better than me because of the smell, Warthog.
Just a smell, Warthog said drowsily.
I think that's what it is. Hah, buddy?
I don't know what you're talking about, man. Smelled like a holding cell to me. Smelled like jail.
What is your last name, the driver said suddenly, eyeing him with his apparent only eye through the rearview mirror. The passenger was still leering at him from the front seat. He drunk more from the bottle and handed it across to the driver. There was a sudden rush of light and rain at the dash then honking from one or more cars and Warthog suddenly swerved hard back into position on the freeway. Tires catching and vibrating heavily beneath them. Both of the men in the front laughed. The passenger looked back again, his eyes rolling all around Ruggles and off and across the carpeted backseat and then back to Ruggles. He belched.
Yer really gonna pretend ye don't smell it, are ye?
Warthog suddenly reached across and patted him lovingly as if to calm, glancing to Ruggles in the rearview as if charged with the man's protection.
Just a smell, Warthog said again.

We're coming up on the exit, Ruggles said.
Warthog nodded once downward again and earth or dust or whatever it was upon his person tilted from his shoulders into his lap.
It's just a smell, he said again softly. The man from the holding cell turned his entire body around in the front seat and sat on his knees facing Ruggles.
Easy now, boy, said the driver. Easy.
Ruggles brace himself in the backseat.
Easy, said the driver. Easy, boy.
You think yer better than me because of the smell, he snarled. He thinks he's better than me, Warthog. Look at his little jacket and pants.
Nothing but a smell, Warthog said.
This is me, Ruggles said.
The driver held the back of the inbred man, and he checked his blind spot with both eyes and closing the other again he pulled across the lanes and onto the exit. They sloped down and he kept patting the man's back and they wound down the exit and came to a red light and immediately Ruggles was out of the car back into the rain and driving away he saw the man from the holding cell shaking his fist at him through the back window and yelling in a crazed manner. Cars whipped by on either side. And water whipped up from the street with the passage of slick black tires like black wet birds launching disturbed. There was a gas station across the street. Blue glow. A green electric sign said Lotto Tickets. He was probably three miles from his house on foot. Too much rain. Already freezing and still damp in his tailored velvet blue jacket. Wet tracks. Jogging now. A police cruiser passed and he froze in a hideous posture for a moment in the street, turning on his feet and then catching himself and going on. Where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. All of these hideous men for what. Toward what disgusting entelechy are all these men launched and myself, as well. All these generations of men. All of these families.

He started walking, the city at his back. Sodom and Gommorah rebuilt and thriving in market and culture. The rain lightened to mist and in a sort of weightless effluvium it hung across the exterior lights of the shop windows and sad brown-bricked stoops of houses he passed. Eyes at the window to torment. The sidewalk glittered with broken glass and rainwater and bits of plastic torn from the tops of waterbottles and bottles of cough syrup and Ruggles nudged all of these things with his gumsoles as he passed them and he hum softly to himself as he trod beside the road. Cars passed going in either direction, slowing as they passed his shambling figure. Their headlights swinging up in sudden and drastic discovery of his person. He hides his face in the crook of his arm. Passing along, the sidewalk ended and Ruggles was forced up a grassy slope that ran along the roadside and breaking at length upon the bare earth so wet was it with rainwater that it yielded under his feet suckingly as he trod along. Sounds of suction and release beneath him. Cold started at the small of his back and ran electrical and tingling up the length of his spine. The flesh of his arms went taut and gooseflesh ran the length of his arms. This freezing horriplated flesh. He lurched along holding a fence as if brachiating through the grassy muck. The streetlight yellow. Silhouetting his tortured figure. After a while, he sloped back down the knoll to the road again and he walked along the clean black pavement. Gumsoles smacking firmly along again. He turned away from the road and cut through a neighborhood, eyes at the

windows of the houses. Television blue and glowing against the glass. A man stood at his door smoking a cigarette while a leashed and shivering chihuahah arched and defecate a few feet from him in the wet and leveled grass of the man's lawn. Ruggles nodded to the man and kept on. The man did not take his eyes from the hunched dog in the grass. A few houses down, Ruggles cut through the grassway separating two homes and he swarmed up and over a tall fence at the end of the property line. He dropped down the other side into a clutching patchwork of Japanese rosebush. He picked what thorns and their clinging branches he could from his jacket and pants and grew cold and impatient and soon trod wildly out of the bramble like an early promethean experiment, breaking himself frantically free from the tangle of thorns as if caught in an enormous spiderweb and he walked on, stinging upon his legs and lower arms where barbs had caught and poisoned his flesh. He walked between the trunks of American sycamore and white pine that grew in narrow tunnels in the forest and he emerged again into a stretch of backyards. Dark atramental and all enveloping. Mist from his nostrils as he trod. He clutched his jacket to his gaunted person and started into a jog, ducking beneath a few clotheslines and managing a passage between houses where he was momentarily twinned in their opposing windows, and he went out between the front yards of the houses and, keeping his head down and shivering hard now, he crossed the street and followed the sidewalk. Squirrels circled the trunk of a red maple in chase as he passed and he ached through his person and felt gnawing in his stomach. Heavy feet slapping along. He felt as if some sort of former calloused version of his person had sloughed off prematurely and that pink and tender he was ejected back into the wandering world. The dark of night felt alien and slick upon his skin and upon his garments, and he passed into and out of light as he trod the curving neighborhood lane with lamplit houses on either side of him. Terracotta glow. He came to a crossroads and the panorama was cloaked with fog. A few small houses across the street stood in darkness and cold sagging, without light or sound. He stood breathing and blinking beneath the streetlight for a moment. Flushing smoke out of his nostrils like some gentle mandragon. A car passed and Ruggle's shadowy figure was projected hugely upon the needles of a row of white pines that ran the length of the road to his right. His breath hung in the air and so soft was the rain that it spun and flipped easily in the matrix where his breath mantled and met the light washing down from the streetlamp. He crossed the road at an angle and took up his pace again, clutching again his coat to him and cowling up the collar like a furtive vampire. As he moved he admitted to himself that there was a point at which he thought he would not survive, not only during this walk, but while incarcerated. That his fevered brain would come to some kind of final horrifying and panicked climax. The air smelled of rain and grass and he could smell the needles of the spruce tree fragrant after the rain and he could smell juniper and ivy and he went along the street enshrouded with fog and through a cold and endarkened gauntlet of blackgum trees that curled up about him on either side and straddled the road, their branches so great that they mingled over the body of the thoroughfare itself and he pulled his jacket again reflexively close to him as cold ran the knobs of his spine and he lurched along, with great wet birds silent in the branches above him watching. A fox sprung out and spirited across the road weightlessly. Ruggles emerged out of darkness and turned away from the street. He passed over a brightly lit soccer field and his form was thrown out in elongate shadow before him and he watced this as he walked and, reaching the edge of the field, he scaled another fence and dropping down on the other side a possum to his right waddled away wispily and he stood

among rows of creaking American beech trees and the night was massive through the branches above him like some kind of auditorium of eigengrau where the stars burnt in weak digital replication. Rain still pitter pattered from the upper to the lower leaves of the trees about him.
Ruggles materialized again out of the forest, and passing through some backyards, he came to his neighborhood lane. He slouched along the lane under the sodium vapor lights, the bowlines of which he could see if he squinted his eyes just so, and he went along and soon he saw his own darkened townhouse on the horizon and he thought of cigarettes, and he took up jogging again and his gumsoles smacked along sucking beneath him and went around the house where his driveway lay and let himself in through the fence and the japanese maple and the quadrangle of grass shimmered in the outdoor light and coming to the sliding doors he pulled and found passage back into the freezing and darkened house. Ruggles went and plugged in a projector he had been using for light in a single working socket and through its blue effulgence he passed like a wraith and up the stairwell into his darkened quarters, where he cast off his damp garments and fumbled through his closet for a change of clothes. He stood shivering and stunned by his experience as he changed in his closet from his dampened garments. And descending the stairs sometime later in a dry tracksuit, he passed spectre like, eyes absent, through the blue mist of light again and rifled through the drawers of his kitchen like a crazed burglar, leaving the refrigerator door open for light. Cigarettes he found in the kitchen cabinet and taking these he reached over and turned a nob above the electrical stove and shook a cigarette from the pack and put it in his ear. Ruggles stood breathing in the darkness as the element gathered heat and when the steel coil burned a bright cinnabar there before him he pressed the cigarette to its outermost ring and brought it to his lips and stood smoking in the dark staring stunned into the darkening orange spiral there before him like some lost penitent confronted at the foot of Mount Sinai with branches enflamed.

XIV

When the man worshipped he would put the snake in the bathtub and run the water warm over its scribbling and twisted form as it hissed and rose up and slid weirdly against the contours of the white bathtub. The man disrobed and sat on the edge of the steaming tub with his hand absently in the water as it filled. When the water was of such a height that the snake washed smooth through the fluid warmth the man reached over and spun the faucet. The water stopped and he took up opposite, perching on the toilet, facing the snake. The walls were papered with a mold green paisley print that peeled at the corners of the roof the sheets did not align properly and the man's hunched nude image was doubled to his left in the bathroom mirror. His naked body was still spectacled and it was pale pink and his arms were thin and womanly and he was erect and staring at the snake, seated upon the toilet, and speaking to himself he begins headlong into his sin. Gazing upon the sloshing snake as it oscillate in the bathwater and slapping himself across the face. He is saying no over and over again and then yes in the same manner and with his left hand he is pulling at the skin of his lower back and he can feel it there forming as promised, first the elected will sprout a tail from his hind side, and the flesh as he fumbled with it half erotically the snake brought its head to the surface of water and let its forked tongue thresh and vibrate and it eyed and hissed and the man moaned and said, Yes, master, and he stood up with urgency and spent himself into the bathwater, grunting hard and holding the whole of his weight against the

tiled section of wall above the bathtub and the room wheeled and the man turned the water on again and put his hand beneath it and adjusted the faucet again and put his hand beneath the water and then stood before the mirror and brought his face to the mirror so close that his nose went sideways with the force against the surface and he moaned and tried to touch his eyeballs to their image and tears welled up in his eyes and he said: Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field, and then again screaming it derangedly, and beginning to abuse himself in a sort of absent automatic manner, and disgruntedly he pulls free from the mirror and spits into it and with his finger first and then the whole of his right palm does he rub his viscous and flagging saliva across the surface of his wormlike and unrecognizable countenace, leaving a sort of blurred circle and the man thinks of drinking blood and the water is running and hears the snake slosh therein and he turns around and kneels on the floor facing the bathtub and he is erect in his loins again and he rests his elbows on the curved acrylic of the tub, and brings his hands together before him in prayer and he is silent for a moment and he opens his eyes and the water has risen considerably and the huge snake was writhing within and he put a hand in to test and stood and stepped with his right foot into the steaming and fertilized water and then brought his left foot in above the foggy water and lowered himself into the bath allowing the snake to arrange itself as it would around him and he sat with the patterned black brown snake, white splotched, slithering against his length and around his erect loins and the man closed his eyes and sunk underwater and screamed and held his breath until he spasmed and emerged and began to abuse himself in the water. The snake hissing and rising up with its vicious yellow eyes on his hand, snapping across the length of the water and his naked form alike and his eyes are closed and he speaks to his master and the spirit materializes above him cloaked in red velvet. His face is not visible. He levitates over his reward and breathes the steaming water and directs his servant. The man moans beneath him and spends himself and the snake swirls furiously through the water and the length of it slides across his red pink chest and rends and snaps across the water's surface at him again hissing and submerging. He begins.

Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field. He is immortal. He with me. Within me. Changing me. The man leant forward rushing the snake sloshing toward the faucet side and he reached behind his person and fished through the filthy water at the skin above his intergluteal cleft and he thanked his master and lay back in the fanning water that rose to the edges and fell as he ceased moving and rose again as he slid his head under the water and began to drink from it. He raised his head and said again, Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field, and allowed his back to slide again underwater drinking. Expressing out of the water again.

Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field. He gained all the world and is immortal in his flesh. Ageless, he moved secret among a thousand generations of sinners and his learning reflects this. The man sunk back into the water drinking and finally thick blood filled his mouth and giddiness rose up in him and the snake flapped wildly, suddenly blind and whipping its hideous tail sending thatches of blood spatter along the opposite wall at an angle. The snake managed his head above the surface and the man held it above the blood in which he set and he cradled it flapping weirdly and hissing above him and he submerged his head again and drank greedily and slurping and rose and he greet it directly in its eyes. The cumbersome weight of the snake flapping in a weird sort of wobble between his hands, sibilating and lurching sickeningly in his closed hands as if he held some tubular dark universe there above the bathtub of blood. He spoke

to the snake softly and he turned on his side in the vermillion mess and lay drinking sideways. His master having rewarded him. And he allowed the snake to lay draped above the blood across the length of his half exposed nude form. And the man in the red cloak is now seated upon the toilet and upon them he gazes, though you cannot see his face for the hood of his ruby colored garment, and he writhes inside his cloak. Unseen to them. A youthful dislocate hand with snow white skin materializes afore the steamed mirror and enubilates: Numbered. Weighed. Divided. And the gaunt shouldered figure in the red robe on the toilet upon turning a moment later gurgled and shrieked weirdly and the man in the bathtub ceased his frenzied drinking and writhing to life out of his suckling revelry and seeing this he threw the snake from him and leaped from the tub and his master immaterialized before him and he beseeched his return and looked about wildly for explanation and it is not until his master is gone that he turns and sees the mirror.

XV

Ruggles woke sweating in the pink grey dawn and Kim was not beside him. Fog nuzzled the small patterned windowpane of the trailer's bedroom and he watched it fog and redden and he watched as the early sunlight ghosted into the room through its limited and largely covered fenestration. White-throated sparrows collected for a moment on the roof of the mobile home above him and launched and he could hear the clicking of their talons and cooing and the shuffle of wings. The room was hot and the early sunlight threw a slack rhomboid across his sudoriferous and contorted form that stretched sidelong and angled up the warped plywood headboard.

They had fought the night before about the child. Whether or not she was to be had. An electric restlessness brew in the marrow of his bones and gaunt-eyed and bare-chested he righted himself upward in the bed and sat against the headboard blinking and looking about the room. Towels and a sheet covered the mobile home's master bedroom windows, but warm early sunlight escaped around the perimeter of the linens and slid across the floor the color of grapefruit and outside he could hear bustling in the trailer park. An engine coughing to life and sputtering out in repetition. A downy woodpecker mechanically working the perimeter of a beech tree in the early summer light. A lawnmower oscillating to and fro a few trailers down. Ruggles felt his back slick with sweat, adhesive against the peeling vinyl woodprint of the headboard, and he closed his eyes and listened to the approach and withdrawal of the lawnmower. The room smelled of her hair, or whatever she put in it, and opening his eyes again he let them slide across the floor of the bedroom where her ladythings and garments were strewn about or stacked tottering against the wall. A bulbous cloud passed unseen by Ruggles before the ragged and vaporous sun and the room greyed considerably, and rising from the bed, pale and crazed in his white briefs, a confusion of damp sheets trailing behind him, he looked a man resurrected against his wishes. He pulled the small latched door that led to the kitchen and sudden sunlight and heat washed like backdraft against him and lurching and squinting he made his way across the narrow trailer to the air conditioning window unit and depressed the small grey power button. Ruggles slapped barefoot across the tile laminate of the kitchenette. He took a glass from beside the sink, the cleanliness of which he did not consider even for a moment and filling it with water, he drank glaring out of the window at the scatter of trailers about him. A black dog then a small boy in overalls emerged from one of the neighboring trailers and ran barefoot from sight among the

rows of trailers, crickets at his feet dancing up and flying headlong through the lightworks of the bladed grass and droning bumblebees. The water tasted metallic. He set the glass down and retrieved his medicine from the cabinet above the refrigerator and washed it down and stood blinking in the morning light filled with grief and the whole of him aching. They had argued and she had left again. It took only three months. Small form within her spinning, will thou be. Love of mine, gone. Her eyes. I can see them but I cannot name the color. Love of mine, come back to me. Love of mine, love me.

They had only been married for a month when Ruggles found the first letter. She had written it and tucked it away in her belongings and Ruggles did intentionally search this out, as he could tell that she had stopped confiding her heart in him. Heat washing through him as he read. Arching girlish script. A past lover. She regret the marriage and their child in her womb. Reading and eyes welling with tears he might as well have been floating half-dead through the tilted black milk of the galaxy paralysed and full of smoldering anger. Love of mine, how love of mine. They had worked through it and two months later he found another letter and to this he was lost in irrecoverable jealousy and wrath and brokeness, as the correspondence had never actually ceased. He move as a sort of disgruntled ghost through these days now, prismed in a sick rainbow of anger and disbelief and loneliness through which he ricocheted and warped and returned and cycled through until sleep. See him now through the kitchen into the micro-living room. The window unit thrum and the trailer was growing cool and from the sectional sofa built into the eastern wall of the mobile home he took up a pair of khakis and a white short sleeved buttoned oxford shirt. The clothes felt cool and dry against his body and he fished a cigarette out of the breast pocket of the shirt where he had left them and he sat smoking and staring into the middle distance. There reclined on the portion of sectional that ran the length of the eleven-by-ten living room window. Murky strobes of light came in about his shoulder at angles and the window unit hummed and rattled and tore at the smoke, tangling it in the air in dispersion. He stare vacantly across the living room at the window opposite and cursed his fate and this brokeness and rage he could not rid himself of for he believed in some version had loved her since he was a child. Unborn child of mine, wilt thou be. Little girl child hardly yet introduced to form and already reflected in the blade of the grim reaper. Love of mine, how. For she had been the answer to Ruggle's sorrows. Her beaming up rabbitlike out of a cloud into his particular and squalid hell, loving him. This dark eyed orphan, childlike and often cantankerous, she had taken into her bosom and his child into her womb. To his eyes she had spoke vows of eternity in a small courtroom in a modest white dress with long sleeves and archwork knit about the neck, a garland of calla lillies and peonies and ranunculus in her hair. He stood in the morning heat with tears in his eyes and run water over the cigarette and outside he watched the soft wind shake the flowers of the neighboring trailer's small but impressive garden. Lawn spirals spun lazily to and fro and these he watched and the window was flecked with birdlime and soap and a spattering of toothpaste. Distortions of heat already blur the vision across the rows of lawn he looked upon, hung like quavering sheets of plastic from the clotheslines criss crossing the backyards of the trailers. Dishes tottered in the sink before him and he reached forward and poked the pile and it leaned over clanking leftward and the ceramic accordioned down in ceramic disks into a clatter of forks and glasses. He looked at these arcing plates as if they were the verterbrae of some repugnant creature that had come there to die. Love of mine, wilt thou be.

Ruggles sloped out of the kitchen and sat back upon the sectional and turned the television on and wanted to die. Spectres hanging at the corners of the room in tatterclad rags, viporous and hovering. He looked away from the television at their sad mobile home. All the surfaces were of various laminates of natural materials and all were peeling at the edges. The kitchen could hardly be turnt around in and there was time in which they sat clutching one another when they would watch television upon the sofa. There was a booth style table at which they once shared dinner and this Ruggles did appreciate for the architecture. Since moving into the mobile home, he still had not shook a sense that he ought to walk with his head stooped for the ceiling though it cleared his head at extension by four feet. Love of mine, nothing matters now.

He spat in the sink and resolved himself to leave. Ruggles could not tell if this heartbreak had morphed into something clinical within his tortured mind, and when he left the house heat wafted up at him palpably from below in billowing sheets and he skipped heavily down the warped and splintering wooden steps set up descending from the trailer to the grass. He stood squinting in his small section of yard, barefoot. The grass rough upon the soles of his feet. It smelled of humus and of hot onion grass and there was a whir of insects satelliting all eye level existence insofar as he understood it. His tan shoes were paired beside the makeshift step planks and he sat in the hot grass amongst zirring gnats and great gangly mosquitoes falling and he pulled them on and stood there and scratched the back of his neck and set off across the blue and searing summer day through the tunnel of backyards in their scatter or their order. He held his hand over his face at the brow as he walked and when he closed his eyes he could see the patternwork of blood vessel against the brightlit pink inner eyelid. An orange cat missing fur along its broad side eyed him greenly and slunk past and broke into a run. Emerald eyed sprite. War weathered warcat. Engine parts and barbecues and firepits and plastic pools brimming with tepid sinkwater and water spiders checking and darting across the scummy surface in the heat, and Ruggles passed along suddenly mortified catching his footing on a strewn hose and taking it for a moment for a snake and half jogging away panicked, looking back, as if it might transform, the sound of television and children laughing at the window at his back. His head throbbed and it was pain aloned that move through the corners of his person and of his mind. He passed sunburnt men asleep in lawn chairs, covered in grease, slumped in various postures and whether still drinking from the night before or just having begun was of little matter in terms of their daily condition and productivity. One of the men opened an eye at Ruggles as he passed and said, What did you say, boy? Ruggles shook his head and passed along with eyes averted and the man burped and closed his eye again and another man laugh with his eyes closed throughout what apparently constituted an encounter and the three of them remain still in the heat there in their sagging chairs as Ruggles diminished in the distance.

Ruggles slanted across the grass and took the far side where the Mexicans clustered and, stepping around a picnic table, he watched a skunk pass fluffily out from the cool of its shadow and waddle off politely under the nearest trailer and into the treeline at the park's edge. He wasn't sure where he was going. He pat his pants for his wallet and found it there and trod along blindly in the drumming sun. Love of mine, come back to me. He passed under a pair of enormous women's underwear hung from a clothesline and, looking back at them, he did meet eyes with the potential owner peeking out from her kitchen table at him ferociously. He waved at her weirdly and then shook his head as if this was wrong, and he drift leftward along the rows of

trailers through the clatter of trash and car batteries and iron trash barrels painted green all of which from the same sour reek escaped almost visually, flies buzzing disgustingly in frenzied satellite of the varied wastes therein. Thick muck like tar at the bottom of each. The urinous and ethanol vapor from the few warm sloshings in crumpled beer cans. Lord of mine, what is this hell.

A dog barked and ran the length of its chain at Ruggles and jerked back a foot from him and he saw not until the last moment and said, What the fuck, and flinched back and cursed the dog again and ran on harried, looking back thinking of turning around and kicking it unconscious there stuck on its chain but for the owners and neighbors. Behold him now. This sinner in his constant cycle of repentance and fall. See him slouch through the white burning sun, in his suffering, arguing with the Messiah himself that He appeared before an entire generation of men and how was it then that we could be left here without him in this purgatorial hellscape and held to the same standard of faith as men to whom you appeared in the very flesh before, men and women who sought out of word of you and assessed its veracity all of the universe riding thereon. How can you expect me, Lord, to survive and believe and not only believe but give everything in faith in the same manner as those who saw the bodies of the saints walk grey and backlit through the streets, risen and fire-eyed, their graves turned over and all of Galillee a quaking and the sky electric and green and timpanic lightning and among the streets they did walk and the commonfolk saw this, as well, with their very eyes. With the degeneracies of a millenia that relished in the hosting of atrocities so horrid that neither Testament did contemplate occurring on a daily basis was Your image torn from us.

Ruggles passed with his thanatos aching in his chest between the trailers, swatting at gnats with a personal manner of strike, sweating along his brow. Shirt already drenched and clinging to his chest. Squinting in the horrendous burning sunlight and attending now to the markered and painted and emplaquered numbers and letters on each trailer he passed, and soon he came to a screen door which swayed and creaked in the heat. The screen peeling away and flittering in the wind with the door itself. A black cat with black slits in his green eyes regarded Ruggles from the trailer opposite. A flock of starlings passed overhead through the heat in a triangular formation and swooped down and pulled leftward like a net and checked and arose again as a synchronized collection, flapping wondrously and black and small. The shape of their forms like figures of iron. The sky was the color of steel and a single thunderhead hung far off and decaying on the horizon. Ruggle's head pounded. In the yard of the mobile home were beer bottles and a soccer ball, a wooden work table with an articulating bench vice, a collection of car batteries and a broken refrigerator. Ruggles looked at the cat and it hissed at him and skipped off in sudden withdrawal from the confrontation under the adjacent trailer. Lord, it all rejects me. Am I raised in hell, Lord. For some life of degeneracy long passed of which I have no knowledge and only the most severe obligation.

Ruggles knocked and the door was so light that it shook and warped as if he was rapping on the back of a sheet pan. A face at the door appeared, tattooed about the neck and head. The face was square and dark with huge brown black eyes. He put a single finger in the air before Ruggles and disappeared. Another man pulled a tee shirt aside from a small windowpane in a bedroom of the trailer and he looked out. Man with a face like a moth. Simian and clustered. Eyes bulbous and black and grinning. The man smiled in a poor denticular aspect and held up his middle finger

grinning at Ruggles and let the curtain fall back to covering his quarters and Ruggle laughed and then the first small dark man was back at the door, pulling a shirt over his tattoed form and pushing the flimsy door aside with his hip and stumbling out down onto the lawn with Ruggles. Ruggles looked down at the man and they shook hands and pat eachother on the back affably and the first wind passed through from the edge of the treeline. The smaller man spoke.

Ruggles, why joo no say you coming?

Can't find my phone. Fuck, it's hot out here. How have you been, Gonz?

The leptosomal and tattooed Mexican felon clicked his teeth and looked about his person as if assessing their surroundings for the answer and turning back to Ruggles, he said, Es okay, es okay. Here, you come inside, es okay?

Yeah, Ruggles said, and he leaned and spat a dry white foam that hurtled from his gob through the heat and alit on the hot dry grass much still in its original form. Gonz bobbed up the two steps and held the door behind him with a dark leathery hand and into a furnace hot reek of cigarettes and bananas did Ruggles walk. Their trailer now hosting some fifteen flats of stolen bananas that were finessed out of the back of a food purveyor's truck outside of a restaurant and now lay brown and softening in the ghastly heat of the trailer. Ruggles looked down as they wove through the stacks of boxed bananas to the trailer's dining room booth and already he could see the soft yellow innards escaping from breaklines in the peel and custarding out of the ends of the blackening nobs. Gonz gestured weirdly at the boxes. They were stacked in a sort of angled wall enclosing the trailer's living room area. Nigh to the ceiling. He glanced back over his shoulder at Ruggles amicably.

Joo wanting a banana?

That's okay. What's the deal with these?

Many people liking banana, joo know, Ruggles? So, maybe every week, ten, fifteen crates. Maybe I sell in park. Maybe store. I don't know, es okay.

Ruggles laughed and followed Gonz over to his dining booth and they slipped opposite of one another and both took their hands up clasped before them, as if preparing to pray together, their rough elbows on the sun warmed laminate of the table. The man who had greeted Ruggles through the window with the giggling digital profanity came falling haggardly out of the bedroom door at his back, laughing and saying, Ruggles amigo, where the fuck have you been, ese? The man had two gold teeth on his lower jaw and was missing his front incisors. His chest was tattooed with the Virgin Mary and a portrait of Jesus with his hands pressed together at their palms in prayer. A rosary that looped down and back up his right ribcage. A scrawl of green and black Spanish words and names. The man stood shirtless at the table breathing hard and grinning idiotically, soliciting Ruggles in the booth like some kind of degenerate waiter, his bulbous black eyes bright with excitement and skittering about the room and taking subtle inventory of the bananas in a sort of deranged and glimmingly possessive manner. Ruggles held his hand out and the man took it and shook.

What's good, Ralfy?

Joo see the bananas, amigo?

I did, yeah. Gonz was telling me about the plan.

Es okay, no?

Yeah, Ruggles said uncertainly. It seems okay. A lot of people like bananas.

Joo wanting one? Ralfy spasmed over to the box as if automatically upon asking this and broke a blackened banana free from its clutching decomposition, and Ruggles watched as spores of mold discharged softly into the dry heat of the trailer. The innards of the ruined fruit seeping out of the leather onto Ralfy's hand immediately upon retrieval.
Es okay, joo take as many as joo need, Ruggles.
Thanks. Hey Gonz, you guys don't use the window unit during the day or something in here?
Why, es hot, or no?
Gonz, it's like a hundred and fifteen degrees in this place.
We use at night. This is because you white, Ruggles.
Ralfy's face went soft and bored at their side and he slackened in aspect and quality and moment later sudden initiative lit his eyes and he reached down into his oil slaked jeans and produced a melted and resolidifed chocolate bar from the pocket and unwrapped it from the top and his eyes skittered mantis like in oscillation and he started backing away from the seated men slowly backwards over the puke orange carpet, swinging his head about and eyeing the trailer wildly. Taking up on the living room couch ensconced amongst the archival stacks of banana. Dust came up from the carpet with his steps in disturbed suspension like water mist hovering in planed sunlight. Ruggles watched this and he looked about and the metal of the trailer appeared to be warping in real time with the heat, contracting and creaking about them. He wiped the sweat from his brow along the shoulder of his shirt and through opposing windows did the sunlight pass in an uninterrupted three dimensional golden bar between Ruggle's and Gonz faces. A kettle started to whistling on the stove and it started all of the men and it began clanking about violently on the small glowing element. Gonz shimmied out from his seat and Ruggles watched as he pad distorted through actual laurences that hung in the trailer. The kettle heaved out a final screaming breath and Gonz hurred back to the seat through the warping air and he slid back in along parallel to Ruggles again. Dark Mexican skin. Square head and huge kind eyes. An ancient look. Smiling.
What you needing Ruggles?
A bag.
How much?
I don't know. An eighth.
Es good. One second, amigo.
Ralfy looked over and grinned weirdly at them and he turned and leaned forward from the couch and clicked the television on and Spanish words in an advertising tone escaped from it immediately, tumbling out into the trailer in rapid succession like an exorcising prayer. Heat hung in the corners and above their heads like some grim blanket mended of scratching wool and swamp water. A grey and black spattered cat slunk out from Ralfy's bedroom, the articulation of its spine visible. It came up and nuzzled Ruggle's leg. He reached down and let the thin creature burrow its narrow warm head into his tousling hand and it mewed and bristled its whiskers against his leg and slunk off to the water bowl. Gonz slid out from the table and went into the master bedroom and returned a moment later and tossed a plastic ziplocked packet of marijuana onto the table that had an image of the Milky Way embossed upon it. Ruggles reached in his pocket and pulled out four damp twenties and he lay three across the table and return one to his pocket. Sitting up and pushing off the ground and the back of the booth, shifting in his

dampening garments. Heat was glittering like a blurred two-dimensional crystal chandelier at the windows and the men exchanged these things beneath the bar of canary yellow light and Gonz offered Ruggles a beer and he reminded Gonz that he did not drink and Ralfy solicited him to stay and smoke a joint and he refused politely. And reeling in the heat he thanked Gonz and scooted out from the booth and trot heavily across the trailer, his vision narrowing and a throbbing fracture in his head opening in diresome cavity and he fell much more than he descended back into the grass and the outdoors and he stood for a moment gathering himself. Chest slick sweat and matted with shirt. Rising and falling in the heat. Blinking and breathing. A murder of crows pecked at the grass robotically about him and he watched and moved cautiously and they watched him and he began to walk and they skipped off leftward towards some pizza boxes and he cursed them, for their eyes seemed cruel and alien and entitled and he passed along breathing over the grass out of the yard through the pollenated and damp heat that hung like some huge wet phantom running wavelike amid the tunnel of trailers engulfing, and Ruggles kept his head down as he moved and he saw dandelions stood in the patchy grass yellow and ridiculous, bouncing hither and thither out of the patchy and mottled earth, and he passed along and seeing ahead a sprinkler in sway, Ruggles slanted across the grassy thoroughfare and wandered closed-eyes and cold-slaked through the titlting half dome of water like some kind of self-selected baptismal candidate, smiling upon his emergence still sinful and wanting to die and trotting along cooling now. A man sending a two-by-four through a mitre saw on the opposing lawn stopped its spin and watched Ruggles as he passed blindly through the portal of droplet. His face blank and sunglassed. Sunburnt and bald. Ruggles saw him at a glance after fording the sprinkler and nodded and the man looked away at once mechanically back to the two-by-four and shook his head to himself and soon the blade whined again at Ruggle's back, declawed now, in the distance and he moved through the distortion of terra cotta and white blended sunlight and he passed back over cutting through the cool shadow between two trailers to the treeline. The park ran the length of a three acre forest and through this Ruggles now cut, breaking at length from grass onto branches and leaves, passing through the sporadic penumbra of bald cypress trees whose cones hung like graveclothes over the forest floor and embrangling himself in a thicket of thorns he backed out slowly and switchbacked along a leaf-strewn slope and going sideways down along it his head hummed in the heat and spiderwebs twinkled before his face between trees and he skipped across a dried out creek of quartz and sand and clay and limestone. Cresting the bluff on the other side and taking in hand a huge grapevine for leverage he saw a parliament of owls attending to him from the branches of the tree, the roots of which he clutch in his ascent. He released the vine and standing beneath, he put his hands in his pocket for a moment and watch them. White feathered and preening smoothly, spinning, they looked like a group of banished druids taken to the trees with their sorcery. She had left forever on this occasion, and he was certain. She had called him the cruellest person she had ever known. He came out at length upon a road. A strip mall lay across the street in a debatable state of dilapidation. There were a few trucks in the parking lot and an old brown sedan with a flat tire and white shirt rolled up in the window of the driver's seat. Ruggles passed over the road and into the gravel lot and crunching along he saw robins scatter up into the air explosively from behind one of the trucks and coming around the other side Ruggles saw a bag of white sliced bread spilt out across the rocks and the robins gathered on the roof of the building, clicking about

chittering and shaking out their feathers in the raw haze of heat and tar, doddering about on the shingles there. He slouched cat-tongued and weeping with sweat into the cool shadow of the pharmacy's entranceway. Love of mine, return to me. Love of mine, who never loved me. Grief welled up in him and a chime purled digitally as he passed over the threshold into the cool of the airconditioned store. Music played softly over the pharmacy's speaker and it sounded as if it was performed by styrofoam instruments. Ruggles sloped down an aisle to the cooler in the back and fetched two cold bottles of cream soda and two bottles of coffee and gust from the aircon carried him back up the aisle, wherealong passing he plucked two chocolate bars nimbly from their slanted presentation. He staggered up to the front of the store and set these on the counter and looked up and there was a bespectacled woman attending with pathologically matted bangs and thick powdery white makeup.

Anything else? She took a small plastic firearm looking device and it chirped at the bottom of each item.

Pack of Backwoods. Cigars. Please.

Ruggles pulled his shirt from where it clung to his chest and flapped it a bit from his body, looking around the store over the aisles, and when he turned back to the woman, who he now understood to be made up as a mortician might apply makeup, she had produced the cigars and Ruggles slid the remaining damp twenty from his pocket in all of its wrinkled shame across the counter and she took it and straightened it out in front of him and Ruggles stood there scratching the back of his neck and looking away. The till rang and the lower jaw of it shot out, and she handed him four considerably dryer bills and some coins and these he took and dropped in his pocket. She asked if he needed a bag and he said, Please, and she lifted and set down each item into a white plastic bag, and she pushed this already clinging and sweating parcel across the counter to Ruggles. He nodded and, like some kind of lost wolf, slunk out of the store back into the static heat and he thought again of her. How she had loved him. They had clung to eachother fully clothed in bed in full daylight just months before in that mobile home and vowed suicide if the other died. She a nurse. They had tried to inject one another's blood, giggling and trembling insanely throughout with love. There was a sunburnt white man sitting in the lot, in the shadow of one of the trucks. Eating the bread. He was shirtless and leathery and tattooed and he sat chewing the bread with his mouth open and Ruggles crunched out at length into the lot and the man waved at him and Ruggles gave him a nod and looked headlong away, and this man, suddenly upright, trotted over across the lot and came alongside Ruggles and looking astride himself Ruggles saw trackmarks running like crocodile skin at the inner joint of the man's arm and his face above was yellow eyed and hollowed out and smiling affectedly as if familiar. The heat carried his sour musk fragrant through the humidity. Ruggles shied back and the man began again.

You ain't hear me?

What?

Ruggles stopped walking and face the man. His teeth were in ruin and he spit when he talk at the sides of his mouth.

I said you ain't hear me back there, back yonder when I was sitting down?

I didn't hear you.

The man stood panting. Without subtletly he looked Ruggles over from his shoes to hair. He spat.

I allowed you ain't. What's your name, bud?
Ruggles sized the man up likewise now.
What's going on? Do I know you?
I said, what's your name? You ain't never heard that question, boy? The man burst out laughing and slapped his filthy grey sweatpants, and spittle orbited about his strange face and his ruined eyes galactically. Vapor waves rose cobra like in perpetuity from the gravel at their feet and the sounds of birds and insects ricocheted from the forest and grasses about them. One ragged cloud still hung in the sky and Ruggles watched over the man's shoulder as the robins lit again upon the gravel and jerked around picking at what remained of the dislocate bread. The man was still looking at him.
I've heard it before. I don't know you.
Well, I'm Randy. Where you off to? The man held out his free hand, the other still clutching the half bag of abandoned bread. Ruggles just sort of waved and the man pull his blackened hand back to his bare torso.
I'm going home, Ruggles said.
Aw, dang. Well, shit. So whatcha got choo you a little place or something?
Ruggles looked around. Look, man, what's up? I'm going to get on my way.
You still ain't give me yer name.
What?
What, you ain't hear me, boy?
Ruggles set the bag down. The man waved his hands and said, Eh, Look, look.
I don't have anything for you, Ruggles said. The periphery whirred and the panorama swum into view crystalline in structure like a still life and there were trees and a strip mall and this man and the roadside and two rabbits stretched to their length at stride in chase in a patch of grass running the length of road.
What choo think I'm beggin from you or somethin?
I don't have anything for anybody.
Looks like ye got chee some sodees. The man nudged the ground near the bag with a curled and filthy sneaker.
Take care, man.
Ruggles leant down and picked the plastic bag up by the rings and the man was close over him and hesitating and Ruggles came up fast and started off again and the man shied away rank in the muggy air between them, liquor on his breath.
Ye live in the trailer park on yonder, I guess, the man said. He was breathing hard.
Ruggles kept on across the lot and the man was at his side again as he passed over the roadway and into the grass. He stopped when he cleared the road. The man was glimmering with fragrant sweat and his eyes were red and blue and demented and he stood squinting and breathing there, regarding Ruggles, brown leather chest rising and falling.
Lemme have one of them there sodas now.
Ruggles clutch the bag to him.
No. You got to move on, man. We're done here.
Ruggles started walking along the roadside toward the formal entrance of the trailer park, preferring not to enter the forest alone with this man in tow. The man was a few paces behind

dawdling but in the same direction. Ruggles looked over his shoulder and he was walking behind him and their eyes met and Ruggles looked forward and then back again at the man trailing him. Ruggles stopped.

The fuck are you doing, man?

The man was only a few paces off. What choo say to me?

I said what are you doing. I told you we're done here.

What I can't walk along the road? We're going in the same direction looks like.

The man was looking at the groceries and sizing Ruggles up again. A bumblebee arced around a few wild white bonnetted flowers between their feet. Ruggles looked to his left and right and spat.

You're walking like fucking four feet behind me.

It's a free country, he said, and I don't see no sign with your name on this path. Or no law saying how close a man can walk to another.

A blue sedan drove past and the driver looked blankly at the two men through the passenger window.

Okay, Ruggles said, You go on ahead then, okay? I'm gonna hang back.

The man shrugged, uncertain of his affected insouciance, and he trot off slowly through the grass along the roadside and Ruggles set off in the opposite direction to cut through the forest and he slouched along through the slanted grassy bank where gnats like three dimensional scatter plots draped out afore his face and his shoes underfoot brought up wood colored crickets and green black beetles that crawled frantically sidelong up the grass and disappeared again into the shadows of the bowed blades. The air smelled richly of grass and humus and the air was hot in his nostrils and his head still throb and he reached into the plastic bag and pulled from it a cream soda. The bottles clinking loudly and tilting as he fetched it out in the noon heat. Ruggles looked over his shoulder and the man was starting back in his direction, head bobbing and his ruined jaw slack. Slick spittle falling from his bottom lip. Simian in the summer light. His thin and hideously marred arms swung low to the grass and he dropped the bag of bread and his fists then balled and the burning earth behind him rose up in fantastic silhouette of this creature and all the scenery joined together at the edges of his dark form and Ruggles slid the cold bottle back into the bag and looked at his shoelaces and back up and already the man was back upon him.

Saw you was about to open one of them there sodee pops, he said.

Did you now?

Ruggles spat in the grass directly between them and everything stood still and he slid the wet back of his arm uselessly across his equally sweat beaded forehead and cicadas whirred from the bush at their side and gnats danced shuffling between their panting and reddened faces and the men stood square eachother in the active grass and Ruggles was certain that this was going to be violent soon and out of his sight he heard tires pull loudly into the gravel lot across the street and both men stopped whatever inarticulate dark nascence it was occurring in that moment between them and look, and forthwith Ruggles started across the road toward the lot.

Where you goin' now boy?

The man hung back on the grass unresolved at first as to what the meaning and implication of this third party might be. He hiked his sweatpants up imperceptibly and started up again a moment later, half-jogging and coughing as he came astrode of Ruggles.

What choo gon' hide in that yonder trailer til I take leave of ye?
You need to get the fuck away from me. Now.
Ruggles waved at the man exiting the cattle truck. It was a large red gooseneck trailer and the man slid out of the front and hopped onto the gravel, wiping his hands on his blue denim overalls and shifting his straw hat to his crown. Ruggles crossed over the road in a half-jog, the bottles clinking and warming, trying to get the man's attention. Pigs snorted and trampled noisily about the back of the trailer and Ruggles said, Excuse me and Sir, and the words were lost in the sounds of hooves and porcine suction and passing into the grey rock strewn lot with the fiend lurching behind him to the right he felt the blade enter his back and a throb pass through him and at once blood spilt warm out into his back pocket, runneling down and around the whole of his right leg and the man jerked the knife and Ruggle heard with the whole of his body as the blade screech against the raw bone of his actual vertebrae then slide out of his back, and his nervous system entered a sort of vibratory state and the blood ran fast and nigh black out of the wound and still upright Ruggles turned to grapple with his assassin's greasy arms, face twisted up and grunting and cursing and swinging wildly at him as they stumbled fighting backwards across the lot. Ruggles couldn't feel the back of his left arm, but he step back quickly and, staggering forward again, swung the bag of bottles and it whooshed with full centrifugal momentum in front of the man's face and swung back without collision and whipped clattering around Ruggles back, twisting rightwise back around his front right. The farmer in overalls was yelling from in front of the pharmacy. Ruggles stumbled back over the gravel and the man lunged wildly again and, as if outside of the moment and corpus itself, he watched the blade's arc and connection, and it sliced him diagonally across the length of his right pectoral through his oxford shirt, and Ruggles looked down at the welling blood as the steel pulled back and put his hand to his chest weakly, and the man grinned dementedly and for the first time all day Ruggles was not hot and, this possessed face bobbed before him, toothless and drooling and muttering obsenities, glinting and bloodsmeared blade advancing and withdrawing. The ground tottered around like a dradel now and Ruggles feint and step right of the man and swung the bag again to its length and it crashed against the man's skull and the thin plastic burst and the bottles therein did as well and the soda and coffee hung universe like in spatter formation for a moment and the bag slung weirdly to the man's skull as he fell sideward and Ruggles let go and it sank splashing with him blood and gravel and carbonation and Ruggles kicked hard and blind through amber fluids and dust and there was wild oinking at his back and Ruggle's boot connected with some substantial part of the man's torso, and suddenly snake like the blade cut the air low at Ruggles ankles and he fell back stumbling into the trailer, grabbing blindly in his vertigo for balance, his pants entirely dark red now and heavy with blood like wet leather and he is freezing and grey now and he reaches back for balance and blindly grabs the heavy iron lever of the trailer lock and it shifted down as he hung his weight upon it and the door slid up heavily at his back and he had forgotten entirely of the pigs though they stomped and sucked at his back and losing balance the man in the overalls was suddenly before him, his dark blue eyes kind and his moustache blonde brown and his voice mute though speaking fast and he spoke words querying, and suddenly did Ruggles see pigs wild and squealing spill out of the trailer all about him on both sides and funnel out, tumbling against one another, vying in impulsive stampede out of the shade of the truck's bed, and they passed out like huge pink hooved barrels and trampled the man with the blade on the ground to deep

unconsciousness and Ruggles, suddenly freezing and dazed, watched this and the man's blue eyes and his blonde-brown moustache spoke words and his hands held Ruggles by the shoulders and the man, he spoke words, and they watched together as the pigs ran the length of the gravel lot in senseless charge, bringing up dust and clitter, and shifting crazily amongst the grey pummeled limestone and, passing on into the roadway in a scramble and throng, were in that very moment, for it was the last image seen before Ruggles lost consciousness, hauled over and torn in pink red explosive gore and he heard sounds of entire procine bodies popping like hot water bottles and shrill animal cries of death for those smashed or dragged to their death by the eighteen-wheeler. Some of the pigs whipped up into the carriage of the semi, their legs caught in the wheel's centrigue and knotted to the scorching metal through their very brokenness, and dragged sideward under the truck along the pavement until their flagging innards lay exposed and pulsing bilaterally. Pig skin shorn away by the roadburn down to literal viscera in still living pigs. Some of the pigs, as they tumbled out into the roadway, exploding as the doubled tires bumped clunking over them like bouys of pink flesh filled with blood and bone fragment and viscera and Ruggles said, to the blue eyed man, apropos of nothing it seemed, But black people don't really like coffee, they call it dancing water and he collapsed grey on the ground.

XVI

The swan slid clean across the rippling green water and sunlight danced in the pulsing liquid and the chicks paddled about the pond behind her, furry and white and alien and curious through the tilting water, reflecting a mirror of bald cypress trees clustered on their knees and their tendrils moving slight with the wind in the garden by the pond. A turtle fell leftward from a rock into the water and the pond gulped and the kid laughed and said, Daddy go, and Ruggles followed the child across a moveable and swaying bridge of two-by-fours and beams and they pounced across together and moved sideward along the grass, sloping up out of the pond to where the turtle had dove, and they stood looking. She in her little backwards tee shirt and overlarge purple shorts. California. They stood perched and watched as waterspiders darted hither and thither across the surface of the pond, and a spiderweb caught the sunlight bending through the trees beneath the bridge and shimmering and antic it hung and the water trickled lightly and the kid bounced shoeless and light back around Ruggles and fetching a stick cast a spell upon Ruggles who aped a state of bewitchment. Stumbling after her arms out stiff and mummy-like and dragonflies dashed through the warm air and down near the water, electric blue and weightless, their fluttering invisibly rapid. Teleporting off to the brambles on the far side of the pond and bouncing over the vegetation. She was six and she talk to herself as she walk in front of him and started sing-chanting, I sneeze when I pee and I pee when I sneeze, and Ruggles broke into laughter and carried on with her and crossing back over the bridge together she said, Daddy, a snake, and he picked her up at once and said, Where, and she pointed and brown with orange camouflage and white fletching along its coruscating hood a snake curl smoothly around the base of a tree. The hagstone in his pocket he fetched out for the girl. They had found it along a beach, shuffling on their hands and knees through shells and stones in the burning sun for shark teeth. There it sat porous and tunnelled through and smooth and egg shaped. He set her down again. A

monarch flapped and stayed its wings above their front lawn, landing on an aloe plant and lifting again off of it.
Legend is snakes follow you if you're carrying a hagstone. They pursue you.
Did you know I'm a poop?
Yeah, I heard that, actually, Ruggles said giggling inside at this wild daughter of his. She laughed.
Will you carry me back to the house?
Seriously?
Yes. Please, Dad.
You're six years old, Dolphin, you can't walk yet?
You don't understand. I'm a poop. I can't walk.
He passed behind her and grabbed her at the hips and tossed her up and over his head to landing on his shoulders and she took his ears like a bridle and he corrected her and swatted her hands away immediately and up there bouncing through the sunlight her wild blonde brown hair dance greater in substance than sunlight itself and she absently matted it out of her face and her eyes green brown with a sort of animal mischief and she scowl out at the world like her father unknowingly and rode asaddle this dark transcendent. Sliding her hands around and covering his eyes. Choking him and leaning back with her hands clasped at his neck. Ruggles sputtering and laughing and threatening to put her back to down to walk and Dolphin ceasing at once with this utterance.
I love you, Kiddo.
I love you, Daddy.
Ruggles and Dolphin moved along, creature and spawn, like something biblical through the gardens, silhouetted and hunched. The sun lay pink in the distance and the light was peach colored and they walked along the neighborhood lane and cut through a sandy switchback that passed through someone's backyard, and the sea glimmed back into view and they could see the salmon colored light dimpling the water, rippling and clear and massive. The surface of the ocean like some effulgent latex filament upon a sea of mercury. They stopped their passage for a moment, their silhouette and shadow like that of some kind of two headed creature. Ruggles curved off the lane and stood at the edge of the sand with Dolphin on his shoulders. As if he moved through the world bearing this child harbinger out before him, and they watched as the orange engrailed sun burnt to a fine terracotta line on the horizon of the Pacific Ocean and a miasmic green warp swum up from the sea to the thunderheads there and evaporated on contact. The sky flesh colored before the moon. The roaring suck and collapse of waves in the distance. A chittering of dark eyed juncos slid in diagonal flight patterns through the crepuscular light before them. Salt fragrant in the twilight air. Behold them, waxing mightily and stacked, the child the father of the man, the man lurching through the coastal neighborhood lanes girded about his ears in his epiphany. They passed along and stalked laughing a peanut colored frog as it scampered insanely away from their continuous advances, and Dolphin pointed leaning with the whole of her body and weight at the crazed frog when it began dribbling piss involuntarily on the sandstrewn grey pavement. Ruggles nearly tipped over with Dolphin's wild swinging and he had to threaten to put her down again. She eased her guidance and they followed the panicked and glistening beige frog down the street towards the moon and Ruggles nudged a cream colored and

egg shaped stone toward it like the cautious passage of a cue ball across the blue felt of the cement and the creature's small yellow-backed black eyes swept about dementedly and it leaped frantically away, legs wheeling in the air and clearwater piss still yet globularly escaping the creature's bladder. Dolphin laughing girlishly and squeaking in the nautical wind rubbing coolly upon the sides of their forms, fragrant of seawater and sodium and washed up fish, ballooning and exploding on the sand. Ruggles had told his daughter earlier that day when they saw these on the beach that long ago he had stepped on one of these ichthyoid corpuses and it blew him all the way up to the moon and his head had gotten stuck in the moon and he had to push his very head out from its embedding in that chalky grey heavenly rock to fall back to earth and she liked it so much that she bade him tell it again now as they walk, and this time when he fell back to earth he landed on another and flew back up and she giggled wildly and slapped his head involuntarily, laughing in her child's image of the father's ricocheted suffering. They passed along and Ruggles told Dolphin that one time he stepped on one of these rank bloated creatures and when he was launched to the moon, somehow, he hit another one of these inflated fish unaccountably present on the surface of the moon with his head and was forthwith blasted reeling back to the earth with a shrinking scream, and sent hurtling downward until his imprinting into the poofing ground.

There were palm trees in each yard and herons grey and white tip-toed regally across the backyards and fanned their curtained wings and let them warm in the sun, and people passed along the neighborhood and they waved and smiled at Ruggles and his daughter and she tried to plug his ears at such moments or put her hands up his nostrils and they drift along laughing and falling across the edge of the universe through the seaside twilight. Half staggering onto a pristinely leveled firey green lawn with a prickly apple cactus that clustered and bowed and sent its barbed limbs out lancing like some kind of enormous preying mantis guarding the house. A grey and white mottled rabbit pummeled from out behind this cactuc and leapt about the grass, nipping at the lawn and Ruggles clicked his teeth at this furry gnomic creature and it did not tend to him whatever and they passed on through the greying crepuscule. Ruggles looked upward idiotically at his invisible interlocutor.

What do you think the purpose of the universe is?

The spittle bug.

Interesting. Just like everything exists for the purpose of the spittlebug?

Yep. For the spit.

Oh, for the spit.

It's spit is pee, like foam.

Are there people on another planet?

I'm a poop.

Dolphin. Do you think there are people on another planet or just this one?

Just this one.

The universe is endless.

I'm a poop.

I love you.

I love you.

They crossed crunching through some more yards and Ruggle's back grew tired and he told Dolphin as much and set her down still clinging to his sweating form and they walked along,

studying all that God directed them to, and Ruggles thought of death and of Dolphin screaming daddy and he said, I love you, and she skipped along at his side and Ruggles asked, What do you think of life so far? Do you like it? And she beside him prancing, watching herself walk, said she did, but that it was boring and Ruggles agreed, and a van passed, and a man with a goatee and glasses studied them and Ruggles nodded, and the man, blank in his expression, did not nod or wave in return and Ruggles watched the man's eyes swing leftward and follow them in the sideview mirror and he stopped deliberately there in the center of the street to confront this and stare it down and the man's eyes were seen darting rightward to the road and he watched and carried on and Dolphin asked automatically if he could carry her again and then remembered out loud that he had just set her down, and Ruggles just smiled down at her, child flower, and the twilight smell of saltwater and grass and fishrot drift about in search of noses through which to be known and father and daughter did watch as they walked together as bats crept out of their clusters and started swinging crazily through streetlights as if they were the very confused agents at the heart of all chaos. Ruggles looked over to Dolphin. Little heat stricken and blushing child.
What happens when the spittle bug manifests in some final form and it's finished? He asked.
It pees.
Dolphin giggled and they, this mythical monster and his daughter princess, this troll and child captive, moved black lit through the moonlight, scurrying across the flat seaside plane, the ocean sloshing in the distance and in perpetual brontide roar and she, little filthy kid, loved him and clung to his shirt and hand and he picked up the butt of a hatchet found along the grass and handed it to her and without a moment's study she sent it swiveling through the air into someone's yard laughing and Ruggles searched the lawn and windows crazily for the eyes of the owners and they passed on into the Claire de Lune colored night morphing up behind them, ushering them indoors, all silvery and collosal, and large dark birds flew heavily across the night sky launching like interlucent light through boughs of Blue oak and sycamore, swooping down through the quicksilver dusk into pitchy and scumswept swamps to snap at the flanged apertures of feeding fish seen at the surface. They slapped along homeward with the ocean drifting away at their backs now, disconnecting from the lunar tidal roil. Water racing everything into eventuals, and the teeth of a megalodon sit on a ledge of dark water rock only twelve feet from the waterline and seagulls squalled and pulled windward hither and thither, their planed boomerangs wings wheeling and essorant and the stars cool white and bristling over the gone ocean, and they come to a lamplit culdesac and cut across the diameter of the circular blacktop towards the door of a brown stucco ranch house with a lone palm tree curving up out of the dark grass of the front yard, throwing its fronds roofward, and at their passing feet wild columbine grew in pink and red folds. Wound colored in tubular fleshy petals among saw palmetto, green-spiked and restless, bobbing smoothly along the perimeter of the ranch house. Beside the door, a lantern with a bulb blown of blue tinted glass had come on automatically with the sunset and an inky cerulean effulgence swam weightless out of the iron glass pentagon greeting them like some cheerful domestic goblin and the light switchbacked and cast oblong across the elaborate carving of the yellow front door, a green smear balooning out across the face of the door as Ruggles opened it, and Dolphin scampered past him into the house with a sudden frisson of energy, stepping clear out of her shoes at the entrance. And pitter-pattering over the sand flecked tile on her little bare feet, she began to run the length of the entrance and kitchen and living room as a dog might after

a bath, and Ruggles slouched over to the kitchen and opened the door to the refrigerator, taking from it a sweating glass bottle of chocolate-colored coffee, and this he set on the granite laminate of the counter and he took a glass from the swirling sunburst wooden cupboards at his right. This vessel he filled halfway with the coffee and he set it down clinking on the counter. He capped the bottle and returned it to the refrigerator. Ruggles stretched his arms over his head and his form rattled weirdly and he yawned and reached over and opened the freezer and crunched with his raw freezing hand through the prisms and cuboids of ice and he filled the glass to full with these. The copper oil slicked surface and nut-brown fluid rising towards the glass coping with each infusion of ice. He took the glass to the sink and let an ounce or two of cold water lap coldly down this frozen vertical maze into the pure coffee there at the bottom.

Dolphin was still chasing her own wildness through the beach house and she had turned on all the lights in every room and he called her to the kitchen at his side and she came bounding around a corner, tile squeaking each pivot of her bare soles, and she looked up at him. Child purer than the planet upon which she manifest. Ruggles asked what she wished to eat for dinner and she said, poop, and forthwith skipped away into the living room where she took to bouncing in an upright position on the pale teal couch. Ruggles took a cardboard packet of chicken nuggets from the freezer and set them beside the stove to defrost and he spun the plastic dial thereabove and aligned the white line on the knob with the number four-hundred and he lumbered out of the kitchen and took up next to her on the couch.

Dolphin already had the remote in her little damp hands and she stood on the channel backed teal couch, bouncing absently on the cushion while she appraised all these shifting images on the television for some kind or colorfully drawn optical representation suting her and soon she watched through eyes glossy and rapt as a crudely animated, two-dimensional Dracula drifted sideward over a scene of drawn and bubbling fog about his feet, grey stone background lamplit, arms held close to his chest in atrophied flexure like two upright hooks. A cauldron of simply drawn bats with large white eyes splashed across the scene in wild division, disappearing into the undraughted ranks to the left of the screen. His black cape dragging and fluttering with this furry winged bombardment. Nevertheless, this comically represented bloodfiend floated still leftward and he came to a brown casket and he interned himself through the lifted bridge, into rippling and cushioned red satin. With one drawn grey hand was he seen to reach up and, gripping the inside lid flange of the coffin, slammed shut the bridge. Animated dust lifted from the ground and the screen swirled and Dolphin’s mouth hung slightly open in lost attention to this creature’s lifestyle and Ruggles sloped over and slumped in the couch beside Dolphin and watched her little moon face and green eyes attendant and he was overwhelmed with grief and love, and he guided her from her bobbing perch to him and she folded her small body into his lap and drummed abstractedly upon her knees as she watched the screen. An illustrated man wearing glasses working by candlelight over a table of colorful and unidentifiable fluids that bubbled and smogged generously up out their glass labware. A white circular moon drifted into position, framed by the window at the chemist’s back and the man, as if in revelation of all form itself, turned from his alchemy and regarded this through the iron-croseled glass pane and in so doing did he begin to spasm and contort wildly, his head narrowing to a hirsute grey slobbering muzzle. The man's labcoat and pants burst at the back and the front with his sudden expansion and recalibration of his person, and the screen showed as from this lupine man’s fingers did sharp

sand colored scythes grow in sharp curvature, and the scientist no longer resembled himself. For his eyes were yellow and wild and he took to all fours and massive were his paws and dripping jowls and directly through the fenestration of the window did he leap crashing in pursuit of the complete lunar image. Dolphin turned around as if for the movement itself and smiled up at Ruggles and tugged at his shirt and slapped him with her little hand and turned back to the screen. The oven chirped, having reached temperature, and Ruggles set Dolphin aside on the couch and he was rising from his seat there as the doorbell rung a series of tones in descent and ascent. Ruggles cocked his eyes at the door and switchbacked on his heels. He slant across the tile to the door. He swung it open half-cantankerously and there stood the goateed man from the white van. The man was white and he wore glasses and his posture was poor and his eyes would not meet Ruggles there in the blue light. He wore khaki pants with no belt and tucked into this was a red polo shirt of poor make that bore the insignia of a business the name of which Ruggles did not recognize. Dolphin turned from her place on the couch and asked if it was her mother at the door. The man's face lifted brightly and he looked up for the first time, but around Ruggles into the house. Ruggles stepped sidelong afore his view and said, Can I help you, sir?

Do you live here?

I'm sorry. Do I know you?

I live around here.

Okay. Can I help you?

I just thought I would come see how you're doing after your move and welcome you to the neighborhood.

Ruggles looked over the evasive and strange pink man before him, sedate in his alien movements like some kind of enfleshed and clothen praying mantis uncertain of the ground it now negotiated and Ruggles felt on a sudden a small warm hand on the back of his leg and Dolphin's little tousled hair was there at his side and the man watched in bizarre aspect as Ruggles patted her on the head and said, Give me a minute, dear, and off she went hurtling barefoot across the tile of the foyer back to the living room couch. The man watched as she loped out of sight and the blue lantern light in his lenses followed her arc like twin moons in satellite of her planet. Moths fluttered about the doorway and Ruggles swat absently at them to back the man up a step or two, closing the door at his back. The night was rich with droning oscillation of cicada and chirping crickets and bullfrogs croaking out like small living accordions and the death black sky expanded all about their persons. Cloudless eigengrau and milk light. Sea wind roaring from where the waves broke on yonder sands. Ruggles gestured with his chin behind the man at the idling van.

So, you don't live on this cul-de-sac then?

No. No, I. I live just around the way on Lake Shore. I'm staying there.

Lake Shore's about a half-mile east, right?

Yes. Not a bad drive.

You said you were a neighbor, right?

No. I said I was here to welcome you to the neighborhood.

The man brought his eyes up and out of the cobalt glow and Ruggles saw them for the first time, encircled in glass there in the moonlight and he no longer wanted this man near him and the man looked away at once and then past Ruggles at the mute yellow windows of the home in front of which he stood. An annole ran squiggling between them across the slab stone path in the grass

and into grass again it went burrowing like a samurai through the enshadowed rows of cool bamboo. Both watched. Ruggles could hear the man breathing, and reckoned then that he had been breathing so the whole time, grunting softly almost, as if in secret abuse of his loins, and disgust filled Ruggles and he put his arms akimbo and told the man that he had done enough in welcoming them and that it was time to move on, and the man glanced up at him momentarily and accusatorily and stuttered out a farewell and extended his hand to Ruggles, who turned away at once toward the door, letting the sick pink limb and its prehensile appendage hang unclasped at the property line, and the man turned through darkness hurtling across the cul-de-sac back into the van and once seated he did scream at the end of his strength. The man then did remove himself to the back of the van, still parked there, so that he might scream into the face of the brothers and they horrified and trembling and crying, soaked in their own urine, and Ruggles watched from a tipped blind as the van a minute later began to move away, following the cul-de-sac out and it turned and passed from view and Ruggles looked to Dolphin on the couch, standing and bobbing lightly as if on the bed of a pearl and he slouched back across the tile to lock the door. He returned to the kitchen and shook out a dozen or so damping and still half-frozen portions of breaded chicken onto a sheet pan and he slid this cleanly into the glowing chamber of the oven. Cartoon song and voice fluttering through the background like some kind of radio for the insane. Though Dolphin had turned all the lights in the house on, persistent darkness hung putrefying like black flowers at the edge of the bedrooms and under the beds and in the closets of the rented house and across the body of the galaxy itself, if it be said to exist at all in the final book of man. That it might centralize and unwind itself hither and substantiate with pure colored horror this tropicalia through which Ruggles and his daughter move.

XVII

The man used the computer and using it he met a similar man. After sufficient discussion and legitimization of their identities and mutual predilections, the first man accepted an untraceable electronic payment of five-thousand dollars from the second man, along with several video files coded for authenticity portraying self-recorded images of horror. And so the man understood this second man to be serious enough about the proposition they were in the process of negotiating and so the he accepted his offer and in a bowling alley they met. The remaining five-thousand was paid in cash to the first man upon arrival in a bulky envelope, and the two men sat at a maroon high topped circular table like secret insects looking away from one another amid the glass signal of launched bowling balls and the knock and clank of pins. Either one waiting for the other to announce his true identity as a federal officer. They sat waiting. It smelled of old carpet and shoe disinfectant and popcorn. When this did not happen, the first man said to the second, I could only get two, and the second man sighed and said, That wasn't the deal, and the first said, They're brothers, and the face of the second man changed and he tapped his fingers in recalibrating perversion on the table.

It was supposed to be three, he said.

Three was the ideal. The third failed. The girl. I have brothers instead.

It was supposed to be three. I had three in mind.

We could not do it at all and I could give you all your money back if you'd like, sir.

Well, how about you give me two grand back.

No.

Yes.
Ten thousand was the agreed upon admission.
And there were supposed to be three of them. And a girl.
I brought you brothers instead. These are arguably better by themselves.
The second man had a scrunched face and ginger hair and he wore a baseball hat and a windbreaker and his eyes were bulbous and blue and wandering over his moustache and he seemed to calculate from recondite elements within himself, considering the issue of siblings, and, a plump man, he suffered scoliosis and was hunched below his neck slightly and so when he turned to look at some thing he turned with the whole of his torso and so he sat across from the man considering. His fingers pruned and soft and passing over the surface of the table in unconscious erotic manipulation. The slowspun drone of spherical glass on wood. This second man looked about the bowling alley for a moment and then he turned again to the first man and said, Deal, and at once both men did slide down from their stools. The second man followed the first across the burgundy colored carpet and out of the bowling alley and the wandering moon sent watery light to their faces in the parking lot and the second man asked to see the brothers and the first said, they have already been prepared for the performance, and the first man wore dark aviator glasses to this meeting and a hat and they stood at his van, hunched in the blue black peril of night where through bats knit circular paths through wind tunnels in the bending light and the first man told the second to follow him in his car and he did so and they drove for some half of an hour, exiting onto and off of a highway, and the first man slowed his car on the side of a service road and put his hazards on and the second man turned his on, as well, and the first man swept on the balls of his feet back to the second man's car and came up to the window and told him to pull into the lot they were coming up to and that the second man would ride the rest of the way in the van with him and he did so as they swung their lights whooping back out onto the paved roadway and passing along further, as foretold, there came a dusty lot outside of a boarded up old barbershop and they parked and the second man climbed weirdly and grunting into the front passenger seat of the white van and he nudged the driver and said he appreciated the fragrance, commenting on the scent of decomposition mild in the van's interior, and the driver said nothing and they drove through lanes straddled by dogwood and slash pine and old single story houses with screened in porches. Further on through the dark did God carry them and the moon did wax mightily behind them as the man pulled the van into his garage and the other said, Nice digs, and the man said nothing again and they exited the vehicle on either side and the man said follow me and the second man obeyed and they entered his home around the backside, the first man unlocking a closed fence that ran the perimeter of his backyard. The two men passed through the dark grass together and entered through a glass sliding door that the first man opened, waited, and closed for the second man, and in a dark dining room did they both stand breathing for the slightest moment before the first man strode afore the second and flicked on a pair of lights. The house lit up to its dimensions and the first man said, Take off your shoes, and the second did so and the first said, Not there, and the second looked up and the first man was pointing and the second nudged his shoes across the wooden floor to the signalled place, and the first man said, Wait, and he disappear padding upstairs for a moment out of sight and the second man stood frozen still in the same spot half on the rug of the dining room floor, his socked feet pathetic and scrunched at the toe like a somnabulating mental patient and the other man appeared

again and asked if the second would like something to drink and the second said he brought something in his flask and the first said, wait here then, and he produced from his pocket a ring of keys and unlocked the basement door and into his secret crypt he descended and disrobed out of his human clothing on the opposite side of the basement where he kept his power tools well organized. Already the dark impulse was within him growling to life and he crossed through into the chapel area, unlocking the pad and the deadbolt, and he took his leather overalls and he slip weird and pale and contorting into their muck and straightened the straps about his shoulders and, breathing hard now, he adjusted the shifts there in front of a splotchy piece of broken mirror until satisfied and he passed back through into the workshop where he retrieved a revolver from a toolchest and he returned upstairs and the second man was walking about, examining the spare decor and the layout, and the man called him over, waving the revolver, and the man turned his whole form to look and then floated flagging across the room, undisturbed by this brandishing or his interlocutor's apparel, and the first man asked the second what the rules were and the second said, There are no rules because this never occured, and the first man shook his head and asked the other for his wallet.

Why?

You will not enter my chapel with your wallet.

The second man shook his head in bafflement and consented and fetched the wallet from the pocket of his windbreaker and the man fumbled it out and the first man took it and walked to the kitchen and put it in a drawer saying, Watch me, this is where your wallet is, setting the revolver heavily and momentarily down on the counter and the second man said, Okay, and asked, How are the boys?

Are they pretty active?

And the first man swung back across the room in his ritual garb, adjusting the leather train conductor hat on his head and he said, They are active as one could want, as they have been under my training and care. The second man laughed weirdly at this and rubbed the front of his pants, and the first man, coming from the kitchen said, You will follow me, walk behind me, and follow my rules as soon as we go down those stairs, and the second man said, Okay, and it sounded like a question and the first man shew him the revolver and passed it to him and he cradled it with both of his small thick finger and held it up and closed one eye, aiming at a lamp in the beige and grey living room, and he handed it back to the first man and followed him down the creaking wooden stairs, rubbing the front of his pants again and balling them weirdly into a knot and releasing this to unfurling and they reached the bottom of the stairs. There was a door with multiple locks to the right and a small workshop to the left.

You call this a chapel? The man laughed and his bud-stippled tongue lolled and spittle escaped onto the first man as he was opening the door to the chapel proper and he said nothing, the flecks wet on the back of his neck, and the second man followed him with jaw slack into the chapel's anteroom and at once he put his hands greedily upon the nearest mounted skull and moaning and putting his face near it and the first man looking back and saying quickly, Get away from that. Don't touch anything, and the man slithered back from these displays of gore, his hands in half extension and drool escaped his lower lip and he adjusted his baseball hat and balled the front of his pants again, gazing upon the taxidermied and the bleached, the embalmed and jarred, and the dried wax runnelling out in a million skeins and hanging like dripstones from the altar in places

several and various and the first man unlocked a second room behind this and the second man followed eyes wide and body turning like a penguin about at the scenery and this final room, bloodsmeared and rank with decomposition and human ejecta and sweat and semen and the second man asked where he might put his windbreaker and so forth and the first said, in the workshop, and the little hunched ginger man trod off and returned stone naked a orange furred and the first man did not comment in any capacity upon this and the second asked where the brothers were and the first man pointed to a large wooden box, nailed shut and shifted to the back corner, and they were being quiet now for they had heard the first man and the brothers, naked and sweating, bleeding from wounds and injuries various, clasped one another and held their free hands over their mouths and both stared at the other's terrified eyes and one started to move his hand away to tell his brother that he wanted their mother, but the brother's eyes went wide with panic and he shook his head crazily and they heard the muted voice of a second man from the box and both looked at one another and kept their hands over their mouths and upon hearing the jab and shift of the crowbar's metal between the wooden lid and the box's frame, the brothers are paralysed with fear as a sickly light red washes in and two warped faces, bespectacled and one of the men orange and naked and grinning, and neither child asks for help from this second man, instead hugging one another and out of the box the first man wrangled them with the revolver and they crawled out naked and blackeyed and hairless and the second man began abusing himself immediately, standing off to the left and moaning and the first man went to the left corner of the room where the pane of small iron coal burning stove shew the orange glowing ember of a prepared fire and the door was slightly ajar and from it extended a metal rod with a rubber grip and the first man lumbered over in his overalls and took two hammers from beneath the potbelly stove and handed one to each boy and he held the revolver up and pointed it at them and said, You are to fight with these hammers until one of you die, as only one of you is going home to your mother to save her life and if you do not fight you will be burnt. And if you allow me to burn you long enough, both of you die and I go and kill your mother, and the boys eyes rolled wildly and one of them croaked out mommy and started crying and his older brother pale white and naked, shimmering with fear and regarding this cave or whatever it was about him, the blood smeared floor, these indiscernable instruments of torture hung neatly from the far wall and the paunchy hunched ginger pulling absently at his wormy shrunken penis and the other man, the one giving directions, is already at the stove and out comes a rod with a metal orb the size of a pool ball glowing pure orange white on the end of it and the man held the rubber grip and he writhed weirdly as if it had bestowed some unseen source to him and the second man moan in the background regarding this, drooling and muttering to himself and unselfconsciously masturbating, his eyes glazed over, bare naked save his socks, and the first man stands over the children, there huddled and weakly clutching their hammers and he said, fight, and they looked up at him shaking and crying and again he said, fight, and they whimpered and the older boy said, please, sir, and the man poked the older one with his unholy candescent apergillum and the leapt up in pain away from the prod and he fell backwards, screaming against the wall, and the second man started giggling hysterically and the first man told the younger boy that if he does not start to fight he will be burnt and he tells both again that either one of the brothers leaves having killed the other and saves the family or both die and, with his left hand he holds the revolver up before them in the candlelight and sick blood light of a red tinted bulb sliding along

the grooves of the muzzle and the barrel, and the boys looked about uncertainly, holding their hammers at their sides, still trying to cover their privates with their free hand, and the man started counted down from five loudly and gesturing with the hissing sphere, and the younger boy swung the hammer weakly at his older brother and it was clear to both men that he missed him intentionally and so he was burnt immediately and sent hurtling into the stone wall, pressing with a horrisonorous cry against a sour reek the like of which he had not smelled before and he turned around and the first man was at his small back again saying, if either of you do that again you will be burnt or shot, and the younger boy, delirious with fear and shivering limped forward from the rank wall and his older brother lunged weakly in and clove him across the arm with the hammer. The boy cried out the brother's name and tried to run from him and found himself immediately at the oscillating hand of the pervert, and turning, his older brother stood crying, and the man said, kill him, and the younger brother looked to the man and said, please, and was burnt forthwith and his little naked form fell tottering again to the slick sickness of the wall and the second man guffawed loudly and moaned and the first man, growing profound, burnt the older brother with the orb and said, kill him now, and the older boy fell away from the scorching metal with great orbital welts puckering on him and the younger boy stood crying watching, hammer at his side, and the man swooped in and held the orb near him and he swung and hit the brother in the arm in the same place, and the brother raised up and clank the hammer against the younger boy's head and his small knees buckled and his eyes rolled upward and the man said, Use the back of it, and the older brother stood shaking and crying and when he said, please, to the man, he was burnt with the iron directly against his bunched and hissing loins and he fell back against the color of parchment, as if the breath has been drawn out of his lungs remotely, and he cried out sobbing for his mother, clutching his ruined items, and the man walked him murderously toward the wall again and said, Use the back of the hammer and finish it or it's both of you and your family, and the man brandished the pistol and the boy shook his head and when he saw the approach of the cinnabar globe humming toward his eyeball he lurched and swung weakly with the claw of the hammer and it scuffed the younger boy's shoulder, as he was lain on the glistening accumulate of the ground. The man repeated himself as before and the child looked up to him beseeching uselessly, and the hunched plump man abusing himself in the corner watching began moaning loudly from his reeking shadow and the first man put the revolver to the older boy's head and he screamed the word, now, over and over again and he cocked back the hammer on the revolver and the boy whimpered trembling and the red light caught the claws of the hammer as it wheeled down from the boy's crying form in a windmill motion and wedge with a sick wet crunch into the back of his younger brother's head and the man instantly demanded more, and the second man moaned and demanded more, as well, and the muzzle of the revolver was brought back to the older boy's temple and he, deathwhite and shaking and filthy upon the ground at the man's feet. And from this vantage did the older brother stove in the back of his younger brother's skull, through his thin blonde hair and sagging flesh, crunching bone and brain that fell away slack from the sick aperture down the boy's back, sliding to the ground like small bundles of wet pink yarn and the older boy, face blood spattered, sat hacking with the claw of the hammer and sobbing wildly as both men writhed and emoted in their particular and respective manners over his ruined soul. Weeping and snuffling below his captors, the older boy asked if he could be freed now to save his mommy and sister. The first

man said nothing and leveled the revolver, cocking the hammer back with his thumb as it rose, chrome barrel envermilioned in the temple's ruby light and glinting, and he pulled the trigger and the bullet entered above the boy's right eyebrow and the top of the boy's skull was pulled away instantly to the wall behind him, his left hemisphere slopping out like deer numbles onto his shoulders and remaining face as he fell dead, and the ginger man moaned loudly, still naked and drooling and oscillating his hand at his loins and groaning and whining loudly now, he paced slowly closer to the accumulate fraternal carnage through the warping red flourescent light and the orange fluttering splash of candle. The first man stepped aside, allowing the second the opportunity to explore the scene at his leisure, and when this hunchbacked and orange furred man stood afore him over the bodies of the boys, right arm moving crazily, the first man cocked and leveled the pistol again, blowing a hole through the second man's head through which one could pass their hand, and for a moment the first man saw the far wall of the temple through this steaming open form slop as the broken skull and brain flew to the wall and the second man went boneless instantly, sinking with a gurgle escaping his raw esophagus, collapsing heavily and naked to the floor half draped across the boys. His copper wire flecked pale shanks spasmed wildly there beneath him, scuffing the bloodslaked stone floor, a body without face or brain but still ears perhaps to hear some final thing. His repugnant orange form gave a final shudder and the second man lay dead as stone in the unreconcilable gore with the brothers and the first man could now begin formally his task.

XVIII

Drano woke suddenly and his body was electric with need and he lay soaked and shivering in plaid red sheets and the sun was hot against the vinyl roller shade and pale yellow and through a small tear he could see a bit of fencing and a brick wall and he reached for his cup beside the mattress and, finding blind purchase of it with his large brown hand, he lifted the styrofoam cup to the bed and sat his head up on the pillow and tilt the flat pink soda pop into his gullet and his head was throbbing and the wall was a matrix of aliases in black and blue marker articulated in a thousand hands and all of them modified in their lettering and heavily stylized and there was a small black television on the dresser along with his pistol, a black FN Five-Seven, four empty pint brown plastic bottles of prescription cough syrup with orange and white labels, and a wad of bills of various denominations. He groaned in his withdrawal and sat up heavily in the bed, the springs creaking within the mattress, and he swung his dusty knees off and a sick chill swam the length of his sweat slicked back upward and bilaterally across the shoulders and his brow was glistening with toxic perspiration and he sat squinting for a moment in a suspension of nervous indecision, hydrophobia and vertigo, and sunlight tinkled against a scatter of golden 5.7 x 28mm shells on the purple splotched rug near his ursine feet and Drano sat on the bed in that moment there doing little more than shivering and dreading vaguely every living and inaminate element from which his life and form were composed. He stared off. The ground strewn with clothing and a very particularized litter. The light from the pierced shade came shuttling in slanted like the wand of a voyeuristic wizard and Drano reached down to the flecked carpet and pursued the pockets of the jeans he had worn the night before and the fingers of his right hand did find therein two small blue circular tablets and he let out a relieved whoop and took one directly and dryly he willed it down his gullet and the other he set on the dresser, standing now and leaning

with maternal care, as he lay a magical robin's egg on the wood there, and his teeth chattered mechanically as he swung his wide black and generously tattooed frame toward his doorless closet. He burrowed with both hands freezing through the explosion of garments there bulging out like some scavenging nocturnal desperate in winter at a tipped trash receptacle in the daylight still restless from its hunger. Drano fetched a black hooded sweatshirt and he pulled it over his bare sweating torso and plucked a pair of matching black joggers from the closet and stretched these upon himself, as well, sitting on the bed, and he stood wearily and lumbered out of his bedroom door and washing into the discordant warm stillness of the yellow tiled kitchen limpid with generous sunlight passing through the naked glass and he shielded his throbbing eyeballs at the croseling refractions of white light and he slouched across the tile, his nose running freely as if the waters of his brain leapt from him. He took a plastic bottle of pineapple cola from the refrigerator and he slummocked back to his room with a sort of slow pulse occuring in both his head and vision. He sat heavily into the creaking cheap mattress and spun the top from the glowing yellow fluid and he leaned forward and set it beside the television, a cold dry tingling throughout his being and thoughts. The room smells of cigarettes and cannabis. The acrid tang of spilt cough syrup fermented into the rug. He flipped up the pale blue tablet from the dresser and dropped it spinning and flipping crazily down through the mango flesh colored liquid, where it revolved above the bottom, the carbonation tearing away from it like pirahanas, and he sat heavily and filled with deathdread and deathwish on the bed, and he took his phone from the bedside table and looked for the remote for the television, but it was not there and he riffled through the red-black matrices of the plaid sheets and the remote unfurled from a damp lifted fold and he turned on the television and it gave to chattering and goosebumps were still plentifully distributed upon him, only slightly less so now, a warmth in the core of his belly building from the first tablet and sips. Drano could not will himself to look at the television so much was even the image of another human being on his keyed and haunted nerve endings. He stared at the carpet and then at the vinyl roller shade, glowing there mightily, though it be pierced. Drano sat blinking, nursing the narcotic cola with a catatonic's expression. His cell phone started to vibrating on the bedside table and he started at this, and watched the phone revolve and lurch of its own will across the face of the plywood nightstand. He took the phone up and put it to his ear and he stood and peered out through the tear in the manilla stained roll down shade, and he could see the section of gating and the grey wall beyond and he said, Hello, and put his free hand to his eyes and shielded them from more or less everything about him.

Nigga, what is you doing.

The fuck you talking about bitch?

Nigga it's like two-thirty, nigga.

Oh, shit. Shit. Nigga, hold up. Wait. Where you at?

I'm outside, nigga!

Gimme like, fifteen minutes, nigga, I'll be out.

Nah, nigga, I ain't waiting no weird ass fifteen minutes nigga. We going.

Nigga, wait. This is my stain.

Tell him we gon leave his fat ass.

Tell that nigga I'm going to slap him on sight, nigga.

Bro, we waiting on you, this is a weird ass fifteen minutes, nigga.

Let's go, fuck him, he slow as fuck.
Nigga, tell that nigga I invented this shit, nigga.
Nigga says he invented this shit.
Tell that nigga he invented himself into a fucking lean junkie who can't get out of bed.
Tell that nigga that he just as bad he just can't get it like I get it, nigga.
We going.
Shut up, nigga, I'm on my way out.
Drano pulled socks out of his dresser and he sat on the bed and pulled them on and he half fell out of the low slung bed reaching for his shoes, and he sat there creaking on the smushed mattress negotiating his feet into his leopard print high top sneakers. He stood from the bed and it creaked out for him and he plucked from the dresser the narcotized pineapple cola and he pulled open a drawer and extracted an eight ounce bottle of cough syrup and this with the soda he slipped into the roomy left pocket of his joggers and the pistol he slid into his right and from another drawer, with what seemed to contain little more than trash and soda bottles, and from here he pulled a lady's stocking and balled it into the marsupial pocket of his sweatshirt and he jogged lightly out of the bedroom through kitchen, a huge icicle dripping and dragging along and breaking at length into sunlight out of the front door and stumbling drastically through the grappling distortion of daylight and staggering on, eyes narrowed to slits, through the grass and the smell of gas and torched cannabis and he held his middle finger up as he approached the white sedan and the back door opened from within and he slid into the leather backseat from the curb and the car was warm and his verterbrae and lower brain felt as if flowers blossomed about his form curling out of warm smog. The tone and color of existence softened and his skin was no longer puckered along the arms. Instead a sort of gleeful warmth swum therein. There were three other men in the car. All of them harried in black sweatsuits.
Nigga, we was supposed to be on the 110 at 12:30, nigga.
I fucked up.
You was fucked up, you mean?
Nigga, we got enough time.
These chinese niggas, they come and go all day. These niggas could get off work at like three or some shit.
We got enough time, nigga, it's two-thirty.
A lot of niggas get off work at three, nigga. Chinese niggas, too.
Nigga, shut the fuck up, Kim Wong dies at his desk nigga all the time that's what these chinese niggas do aint no getting off work at three bullshit. These niggas literally worship money. Just get on the highway bro. Like come on, bro.
They drove through narrow streets with small gated parking lots and single story stucco houses on either side of them with their bright green lawns framing them against the water blue expanse of sky and alleways ran between the houses at every city block and down the alleyways one could see blacks standing in groups or crowding around idling cars and they had not yet seen a police cruiser on their drive which was a good sign and the scenery blurred at his shoulder and he looked to his left where Slime sat licking at the ember end of a thick brown cone of smoking cannabis and Drano said, nigga put that out on the highway, and the man nodded as if to himself and they came to a stoplight and the city crawled all about them grotesquely through the urine

sunlight and the heat and trembling mendicants and aged leathery prostitutes tottered the sidewalks pathetically and blacks wearing rags from their waistbands and standing militant like with their hands folded at the bottom of their abdomens or riding down into their crotch and the blue metallic sky suspended sheet like and shimmering over all of this and the sun burnt miserably above and the car next to them at the light had tinted windows that were rolled all the way up and the Drano slid down in his seat and put his palm calmly across the stippled grip of the FN and the other men did so similarly, unseen and unspoken amongst them, and the light turned green and they curved along, the derelicts sweeping up at Drano's side like animatronic monsters on some haunted amusement park ride, and he scanned the left of them now and Slime was dangling a viscous string of spit from the split of his lips onto the cigar's glowing end and it hissed and he put it in the ashtray and Waffle looked back over his shoulder and said, Nigga, get that shit out of there, this bitch is new this aint your momma's coffee table bro, and he fetched it out with his brown fingers and studied it and assessed the possible warmth of the tip and he slipped it into the cargo pocket of his hunter green pants and shrugged feline like and looked out his window. Tonto was in the seat in front of Drano and he hadn't spoken yet. Waffle pulled the car onto the exit for the highway and they tilted up the onboarding slope and accelerated and shifted into the oscillating lines of cars and they still had not seen a police cruiser and all noted this at some point by now and Drano sat forward and fetched the cough syrup and plastic bottle of pop from his pocket and on the steady plane of the highway he held the pineapple soda in between his hips and he unscrewed the tawny plastic bottle carefully and held it so that the sunlight passed through it at his eyeline and the smoky brown bottle's murk was enubilated and he was able to gauge the pour line and he held it again up, chalice like, behind the headrest so that the light might elucidate the properties therein again and he tilted the bottle and the mucoid purple fluid slid out in a swelling and thinning line and he tilted it back into the bottle, like some living cord, and held it again to the flickering highway sunlight and poured again from it another treacly line that ran like a blood let through the blushing yellow liquid, swirling in a line that skeined and branched arterially, spinning at the bottom above the four plastic quadrants and loosening and dissolving through the cylinder. The pill's original form lost now to blue flecking alone through the purpling and radioactive bright liquid. He flipped the bottle over and let it tilt about by the neck in his hand and Wafffle looked back at him and shook his head at him and the syrup raced blood like to the corners and bloomed up from the bottom and, solved now, the fluid bore a new color of guava like bare sinew. He righted the bottle upright and spun the cap slightly and let it hiss there and he spun it slightly more and it hissed until it hiss no more and he opened it and drank gratefully and sparkles warm and glimmering ran from the back of his head outward and he felt his digestive system churn to life and he eyed the cars parallel them and afore them and those that passed behind his shoulder and Tonto still hadn't said anything and Drano kicked the back of his seat and said, What's up with you, nigga? You was talking all that shit in the background on the phone.

Shut up, nigga, he said lazily without taking his eyes from the road, passenger or not. In the opposite aspect on a sudden, he turned around to face Drano and asked, You look at your whip this morning, nigga? and Drano's eyes clouded and he screwed up his face and his huge head looked to Tonto, and his child's eyes went blank with remembering and he saw within himself some half encoded flicker of memory. The sound of metal crunching unnaturally and airbags

deploying. Laughing and someone saying throw some bread on the bitch, and nothing more than this and he said, How bad is it?
It's bad, Tonto said, and he smiled and clicked his teeth. Nigga sipping all that lean.
Oh, nigga, you ain't crash your whip dead sober like three weeks ago?
I was texting, nigga.
So?
So?
So shut your bitch ass up, Tonto, and turn your weird ass back around.
They drove in silence for a moment. Waffle's eyes were wide and he was grinning looking back at Drano and Slime sat slumped there regarding him with red eyes and a sarcastic grin through a tangle of dreadlocks that spilled out of the sides of sweatshirt's hood.
Fuck it, Drano said. I'll get that dumb ass shit fixed tomorrow. I bet we grab, like, forty, nigga, or sixty on this.
Are we getting off at Rosemeade? Waffle asked from the driver's seat.
Yeah, La Puenta is still hot for sure. For sure.
Waffle drove the speed limit and signalled correctly and though he could not even tell you from where he obtained his driver's license or through what means, he drove as if proctored over and well studied in the doing of it. The sunlight was like white cotton candy from which Drano's enormous and now swimming head fed purely and a soft precision now move through his blood and his thoughts and he pad the FN again in his pocket and click mutely against the faceplate of his phone and he drank from the blushing pink liquid and Waffle sloped expertly out of the rightmost lane onto the exit and they all slumped to their lowest in their respective seats now as they curve along the region to be violated and Waffle asked, left or right, and Drano told him to take a right at the light and to follow the road until the stop sign, where he could take a left into the neighborhood. The scenery through which they cascaded was orderly and bucolic, and all of the men watched it skeptically in their various states of glazing. White rocks pummeled and evenly distributed about the base of rosebushes and the streetlights and telephone poles with naught writ or post upon them and they slouched especially now and Waffle took the directed right and followed along a California sycamore and cherry blossom lined roadway and the petals unlocked from their brittle appointments on the boughs above as they whooshed beneath in the white sedan and these soft pink red-blotched scallops spun to the ground, lilting, and as if in decision of some course, and the men looked at the trees as if they were some kind of intergalactic sculptures entirely alien to them and to life itself, like things to be hidden away. They came to the stop sign and Waffle came to a full stop and curved the car into the neighborhood's entrance and they passed along, Drano directing from the back, through a series of a neighborhood lanes straddled on either side by two and three story homes of modern design, white and blue shingled with vinyl siding. Sprinklers swung across most of the lawns and threw perpetual and thin rainbows in their spindrift over the dark green wet grass and they passed along and Drano directed Waffle into a cul-de-sac and he pointed and said, Those two, nigga, and Waffle nodded and the other two men peered out as if some secret lay at the door of each and Drano told him that they were going to drive out of the neighborhood and take a left, and he leaned back again in his seat the world softly sparkled before him and he spun the cap of his little potion and sipped it conscientiously now. He returned the white plastic cap to the bottle and he

leaned forward with his heavy form and returned this to his pocket, and Waffle took the left and they passed along for about one hundred yards and there was a dirt lane that was unmarked to the left and Drano told him to pull down it and they bumped along sidewards and longward over the dusty course and, coming to a dead end where there lay a unpersoned house in stalled construction, Waffle park the car. He reached across and took the bookbag from below Tonto's knees and from this vantage, a field and a passage of trees lay between them and the back of the formerly indicated homes and they unbuckled from their belts and the car was chirping and each of these men did slide a single leg of a woman's stocking over his head, giving their faces the look of thumbs in distortion, and they exited the car and all pat at their clothing from the dust swirl at their feet and earth still sloughing up dust in roils and coating their pants lightly and they passed through the treeline, mumbling and uncertain, looking up at these gnurled monstrosities as if walking between the legs of some enormous arachnid, the abdomen and chelicerea hidden above the clouds, or above the very sky itself, and through the alien grass they trod and not one of the men spoke save Drano and he whispered to them, no scrambling, no words, every room, every drawer, the safe last and we out. The men nodded and they passed over the field in their black and their stockings through the suburban daylight like scarecrows ensouled and driven to gathering in revenge, distorting across the ragged sunlit field. The four men came to a row of trees through which they could see the back of three houses. They crouch together there like natives and the grass felt strange and bristly and sensate and they shove the leaves from them as if coated in some kind of creeping ectoplasm and the wind blew lightly and the enmasked men slunk the further to the earth, along their bellies now, their pistols guarded softly with their hands from the ground, watching the backyards through stockings like grim homemade and eyeless dolls and Drano nudged Waffle and the other two looked to them.

It's the two on the right, Drano said.

No nigga, you said that one and that one, Waffle said, and he pointed to the houses on the left.

Nah, nigga, Drano said in a half whisper. I found the spot in the phone book. It's them two. Niggas named Andy Chang at both houses. Neighbors. A double.

Nigga, I think you said it was those two. For real.

Nah, it's the two to the right. Who's hitting the bells?

Nigga, you hit one, Tonto said.

I'll hit one, nigga, fuck it, said Drano. Slime, nigga, you hit the left and I'll take the right, let's go.

Slime's reddened eyes came to attention and they rose up with the rest of him and he patted himself down in disgust and swept his joggers down the length with his hands and the two men began through the cluster of trees, passing through them as if through a graveyard or cemetery of some sorts. For these men knew pavement and gates and wires and fencing and brickwork and cars and streets and streetcorners and these arboreal things seemed solemn and otherworldly to them. Drano adjusted his huge head in his mask and he looked to Slime, who was doing much the same and attempting to bundle all his dreadlocks around the back of the netting, and they wandered crazed together looking through the screened afternoon forest. Shadows sliding out before them as if projecting the very substance of shadow back into the three dimensional image of the approaching and largely black-clad masked men. They broke at length onto the back of a lawn and nodding to eachother the men swept bilaterally through the backyards along the sides

of the house and around to the front door where each man saw the other on the doorstep and nodded and rang the doorbell several times and ran across the street, holding their pistols firm against their hips, hiking up their sagging sweatpants and taking up prone under a spruce situated in the grass opposite these houses both with lined boxwoods about the windows like skeleton flowers and neither door opened and the men looked at each other there huddled in the enshadowed earth and Drano held up a finger and they lay with their heads against the cool grass like huge reptiles, breathing and watching one another and the house in absolute severity and waiting. Wordless, after some time, they rose and jogged back across the street and their paths bifurcated and both did knock hard upon each front door again and then go hurtling around the back, along the side of the house. Pistols bouncing wildly in their thick joggers and their guidance slowing their pace, like men injured at the pancreas made to race. They met again where they had emerged from the woods into the backyards and breathing hard they watched, as did their compatriots in the rear for any movement visible through the back sliding glass doors or the kitchen windows of the homes,. Or if there be any movement of the curtains on the first or second floor. And Drano looked to Slime and nodded to him through the elastic polyester matrix and both men did then jog to the back door of these homes and knock hard upon their rear entrances, sprinting all the way back through the woods now without turning, the moment after doing so, and sprinting back to the treeline, their sockdoll potential codefendants still there poking up out of the grass watching. Drano breathing harder than before and going immediately prone to the grass, panting. Getting there slightly before Slime and neither saying a word until back in position. The men lay sucking the grass fragrant air with their fellows, looking to the houses. Their bodies rose and fell crazily with the effort of their breathing, and Drano asked if anyone emerged behind or if there was any movement and Waffle said there was not from either house, and Drano asked if he was sure and he said he was and Tonto said the same.

We hit em, nigga, so you two is either kicking doors or doing the flatheads.

The two men nodded that this was an appropriate estimate of what had transpired and what was now required of them and the four of them rose like rotting things from a casketless grave still caked with mud in their dark garb and in their contorted, furtive movements, heads like huge nylon stuffed creatures, through the scattered passage of trees and fallen bough and branch and water purled lightly tinkling in a small stone fountain in the backyard of the house on the right and the men gathered at the treeline and whispered in assessment and coordination and decided upon the rightmost house first and the second one immediately thereafter and they, all four, move like assassins in coupled and light laid steps and they came upon the backdoor of the home and Waffle produced a flathead screwdriver from his bookbag and this he wedged in the crevasse between the angled metallurgy of the lock and the door's frame and he pried with all of his silent weight until the wood cracked around the flathead and the lock's frame fell loose within the hollow of the door and it swayed open weirdly like something living and the men entered the home in a line as if diving downward and synchronized into water.

Drano hurtled immediately upstairs through the miasmic smell of fish oil and herbs to the master bedroom and he removed the pale cream pillowcase from one of the pillows and lift the mattress and found there two pads of bills, each almost two inches thick, and these he tossed into his makeshift satchel at once and, turning to the dresser, he swept clean the top of it, taking the jewelry boxes in their little cat-embroided chests and putting the whole of them into the pillow

case and rifling the drawers open. Ventilating each of them. Finding a timepiece of pure gold in the top right and pocketing this and then scattering the other three drawers and turning and looking this stranger's room over and wiping his head weirdly against the mask and, moving back onto the landing for a moment with his darkened fellows moving likewise downstairs silent, he sloped across the well vacuumed carpet and entered what appeared to be a study or computer room and he went to the closet like some kind of truffle pig and slid aside a small curtain the owner had installed to conceal his safe and he whooped out, Got it, niggas, and the men downstairs understood whooped out themselves and Drano stretched in and began to feel around the sides and back of this cool metal cube, and it was not bolted in, and he sighed in relief and tried to pull it toward him a bit and the weight of it was formidable and he yelled, over his shoulder, This is a two or three man, and Waffle was upon the stairs at once, leaving his pillowcase on the landing, suddenly crouched at Drano's shoulder. Waffle and Drano dragged the safe out of its wooden nook through a series of scarring zigzags and when they got it on the carpet there in front of them, the men's hands met in the air as they rose from the floor, and both did croutch down to their lowest and count from three and lift the monolitthic thing, both men crying out quietly to himself, and lugging along swinging, as if the safe directed its movers, and they bore it down the stairs with dangerous haste, arms slacking, and the massive anvil of a lockbox tilting and swaying crazily in their hands, the men having underestimated the weight by some forty pounds perhaps too much for them, and Tonto saw this losing struggle and dropped his pillowcase and sloped up around Waffle to the middle and steadied the thing between the men and they wrought it, all three of them, across the wooden floor like a golden tabernacle through this strange and thickly fragrant house. Filled with statues of cats and stacked newspapers in Chinese. The smell or remedies unrecognizable and apparently unnecessarily so and they went six-legged under a metallic square brain tumbling out of the backdoor, setting the huge weight of it down loudly with a dangerous metallic crash like a missile rolling off the bed of a truck. They returned inside immediately to retrieve their bags. A black squirrel leapt along through the dark terracotta afternoon sunlight. Statutes of cats in the backyard. Songbirds trilling out from the branches at the treeline and growing restless and swooping off with the darkling day to their nests. All four of the men materialized again at the back door. They stood over the safe. All of them were breathing hard and looking around and shrinking against the backwall of the house below the house's backporch. Drano looked at the second house and gestured to the men.

Nigga, I don't know, Waffle said. We can't even move all of this shit if there's a stove in there.

Alright. Alright. Chill, Drano said, and he looked around over both of his shoulders and he turn back to the men huddled there and he said, You two niggas lug this shit to treeline while we bust this shit and then come back and then we bring everything at once to the car.

Nigga, we aint lugging two stoves and Christmas stockings full of jewelry across that field in broad daylight if either of these houses goes hot.

I'll be honest, nigga, I'm good with one flock today, Tonto said, and Waffles eyes met his in agreement.

Nigga, Andy Chang is right here, too, you weird ass niggas. This shit ain't hot yet. Slime, nigga, don't tell me you're on this gay ass shit.

Slime was silent.

All of the men were looking around in hypervigilance having stopped too long in a rush of adrenaline and Drano shook his head and he said, You niggas bring this shit to the car and wait, me and Slime are hitting this bitch. And keeping it, because you weird ass niggas are blanking on a mission.
Slime looked at him and nodded.
Nigga gotta pay a fee if you driving, Tonto said, and Drano looked at him as if he were some kind of disgusting larval creature arriving upon them in interruption and given to words and he said, Shut your bitch ass up, and put his hand to his pants to indicate his pistol and Tonto looked away in the afternoon light and Waffle said, Well he, and Drano said, Shut up nigga, ten percent. You niggas carry everything to the car and wait. Beep if either house goes hot. We are not hitting lights.
Waffled nodded and Tonto did, as well, and they consolidated the pillowcases and tied them about their hips and the men lifted the safe and both stumbled back then staggered forward heavily almost crashing into the wall there and Slime steadied it at the middle and Drano asked if they were going to be able to carry it and they said nothing and looked at one another and Drano rolled his eyes like a man whose long ago run through his fill of patience with the repugnant world and he told Dolphin to steady them to the treeline and he asked Waffle where the bookbag was and Waffle with his chin indicated the ground beside the door. There the canvas bag lay like a deflated balloon and Drano swept to it as the three men trot heavily hands merged on the safe like some kind of injured and six legged spider and they carried it nigh above them through the treeline into the crackling chitter of the forest together and were seen by Drano dropping it once while crossing over a fallen log and he stood at the glossy red painted door of the second house and the flathead he slid smooth between the locking mechanism. He tilted downward the weight of the metal and pulled leftward against the wood and the lock went slack and the door did not open and he brought a single eye to the crevass and squinted and saw another deadbolt, and he slid the flathead slid sideward vertically to where he saw the second deadbolt, and at an angle he crossed it, the sounds of metal in exchange, and tilted the translucent hard plastic of the handle with all of his weight and pushed until there was a wooden cracking heard and the deadbolt yielded and fell within the door and the crimson washed door creaked open outward and a darkness with it that was profound and cold and he felt it wash slack and cool against his legs and he returned the flathead to his pocket and it scraped the face of his phone and he groaned. Before him lay a set of wooden stairs leading up to a landing of lacquered wood slat and he entered in his crazed aspect and the house did not smell of recondite medicine or feline worship but something else unrecognizable entirely, a sort of masking disinfectant. Upon the walls no heiroglyphic scrolls hung bearing colorful images of bamboo and peacocks and there was not a single statue of a cat within the home, nor an altar, and Drano glaned behind him before cresting these stairs and he did see Slime still laboring along six-legged with the others and the safe through the woods and he returned his vision to these polished spartan surroundings. Modest and anonymous decor and said, White niggas, or asked it to himself, and he passed over a the hardwood floor and taking the stairs two at a time holding the banister with the sleeve of his sweatshirt he glanced downward at the floor he had ascended from and saw a second lock on the basement door and nearly turned around there but crested the stairs instead and Drano stood on the carpeted landing and the house had a subtle and unnameable sour reek beneath the cleaning

spray and antevally fragrant potpourri in bowls throughout like an elderly woman, and he could not name it and he associated it with the owners, and perhaps whites in general, and there were two bedrooms at the landing and an office with a a massive curved computer monitor with a sliding chair and several pieces of technology unrecognizable to Drano and he swept the bedrooms for cash and money and found nothing and finally he returned to this computer room again and he checked through it and he heard Slime slapping around heavily downstairs now and he yelled, Nigga work on those locks on the basement, this shit is dry as fuck. He rifled through the closet on his knees and there were anonymous pieces of children's and women's clothing piled about there and Drano noticed some blood on them and dropped the bunch disgusted and looked about the base of the closet and there was nothing but the same darkness and he descended the stairs and Slime was slouched with his eyes level with the locks on the basement door and Drano pulled every door of the kitchen drawers and cabinets open and there was a wallet lain in one of these drawers and out of this he plucked the cash, a few twenties and tossed it weakly into the empty pillowcase. Dolphin pried off the top lock and was working at the second and Drano was watching the backyard.

Nigga, you did the entire upstairs?

Yes. These must be white niggas or something.

We in the wrong house.

Maybe.

The door yielded and they descend the stairs to the basement and reaching the landing there was a small workshop to the left, well organized and well lit, and a door with a padlock and two deadbolts to the right. Drano put his hand excitedly on Slime's back and he clutched the man by his shoulder and said, Nigga, this has got to be something. They stood blinking enscreened for a moment eyeing the combination of locks. Drano groaned and said, Fuck it, Back up, nigga, and Slime did so, and Drano walked backward a few strides, eyes on the door, and he stood square with the frame and he took two fast steps and brought the taupe engraved gumsole of his designer sneaker hard against the wooden slat, just to the left of the locking mechanisms and it wobbled hard and cracked and so too did his leg and, slightly throbbing, he kicked again and the door gave easily this time, sending him hurtling through the threshhold. And into a half-lit chamber of human horrors he did crash and a sick sour reek, it seemed from the very source of hell, swept up to him putrescently and his hugely whited eyes saw skulls mounted upon the walls, all of them gawking at him and some with cobwebs in the planed machinery of their jaw. Viscera and appendages in jars of alcohol with wax skeining crystallized and fractured down the container. A pair of brown eyes. Partially torn away from their full spherical form but still betraying the nature of the owner. Incomprehensible structures of human materials that were not human appendages. The light of the basement flooded in and washed among the sick darkness and he saw greying skin with a pale blue mold stretched across antic structures of human bone, and he saw bits of skull and bloodsmear upon the grey slate floor. A lightswitch. Sick oxblood colored bulb. A second door at the back of this closet of horrors, as there would be in a nightmare, and Drano stood stunned, the spare light crossing the white of his eyes wide with fear and wonder, and standing blinking about these souvenirs of hell they did generate within him the selfsame sensation as if spiders crawled freely across his body, or as if snakes knotted wildly in hissing proliferation at his feet.

Slime was outside this room, in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs, his jaw slack even against the compression of the stocking. The whites of his eyes glistening in relentless pursuit of some artifact of understanding. Slime stood stone frozen, gazing through the elastic matrix to where Drano stood, circling through the red flourescence with his mouth similarly agape. And from where Slime stood, he could see much of what Drano could see within the room. He saw himself trembling and mortified in the light of the hallway at the foot of the stairs, as if he hung above his form at the ceiling.

Let's go, he said.

Nigga. What the fuck, Drano said, and he turned back and looked at Slime and repeated himself, saying, Nigga, what the fuck.

Let's go, Nigga. This shit sick. This some weird ass white nigga shit.

Both of the men held their pistols to them as they spoke now, and Drano stood about as if besorceled by the grotesque memorabilia there stretched and rotting all about him, and he shook his head and looked back to Slime and said, Fuck this weird ass nigga, and he stepped back for clearance and kicked the second door and it broke hard against the doorframe and swung inward, and a white woman in her thirties, naked and bloodsmeared, stumbled out in sudden mumbling supplication toward Drano with four holes drilled across her forehead and she yammered weirdly, and a snake slid across the floor as if guarding the room and Drano brought his pistol up immediately from his side and nearly shot the woman dead through the face, and the snake swirled in the back of the room crazily, and Drano yelled in a panic, Stay the fuck back bitch, and he staggered backwards through the grotesque anteroom, training the gun on the drooling lady, and he backed up, half-stumbling until his back touched Slime's frozen form, and they turned together and ascended the stairs in silent and dead serious horror and both held their pistols naked in view at their sides as they passed through the modest decor of the main floor and across the glistening lacquered woodfloor of the landing and down the stairs and out of the back of the house, skipping stairs and half gliding upon the rail and wall and bursting forth into the backyard into a full sprint through the grass, guns still gripped hard in their right hands unselfconsciously and through the woods they ran, their knees high, and they loped through the twisting rows of trees, Drano trailing Slime, and broke headlong into the field through bright kudzu rife with hidden thorns unheeded and Waffle and Tonto saw them fall sprinting so into view and Waffle said, Fuck, nigga, this shit hot, and he started the car up and Drano and Slime looked like huge frantic voodoo dolls rushing through the afternoon light over the damp grass toward the car and Tonto asked Waffle why they these niggas had their guns drawn and in the same moment they were upon the car, at the windows yelling, patting the roof of the car bilaterally in a panicked open palmed drum for the rear doors to yield their entrance and the lock shift and the men swung into the car's backseat on either side and Drano said, Go nigga, go, and Waffle started backing the car up along the dusty trail and he asked what happened in there and if they got anything or if someone was home and Drano and Slime both did still hold their guns in their hands and not in their pockets or in their waistbands, as if those rooms themselves pursued them nevertheless, and they sat breathing hard and coughing and blank of aspect and looking at eachother in the back and Waffle kept asking what the fuck happened and Drano spoke up as Waffled pulled onto the main road out of the construction site. Trees arching across the road above them and commingling in their further boughs. Enshrining their escape.

Nigga, let me breathe, nigga.
Well, what the fuck nigga. Do we have heat on us?
No, nigga, no heat.
Then what the fuck. Why you niggas running empty-handed?
Drano coughed and he looked out the window and he pulled the stocking from his head and slouched in the seat and laid his pistol in the middle seat of the back as he fetched out his bottle of pop which running he had tended to with as much care as he had his safety-less French pistol, and he spun the lid and drank thirstily and Slime put his arm out and Drano said, Nigga, are you fucking kidding me, this is like six-hundred dollars worth of lean and he sealed the bottle and returned it to his hip pocket and they were on the road that serviced the highway and rosebushes and sycamore stood in orderly senselss rows where the roadway met the grass and the sun was sagging and colossal like pale blue aluminum crumpled all about them and Drano looked off to the sky where he did not often tend to and a few massive white thunderheads hung on the horizon, shifting windward along the bottom as if rotating, and Waffle's car tilted and they sloped onto the exit and Waffle asked again what happened at the house and if they were sure they weren't sprinting because there was an alarm or occupant or actual police at the scene and Drano, breath steadied now, reassured him and Waffle asked again what happened and Drano looked out the windows, to his right and his rear right and he slumped in the seat and Waffle solicited Slime for an answer and Slime seemed to be in some kind of stupor and the car was warm and it smelled of cannabis and leather and the items from the first house. Drano waved his left hand swallowing weirdly at the driver that he would dulcorate him with some kind of explanation.
Okay, nigga. So we pop the backdoor, nigga, and I go in alone and sweep the top floor, and I'm like, going up the stairs or whatever and I see that there's like six locks on a nigga basement door and there ain't shit upstairs by the way - like, nothing, some gamer computer or some gay shit but there's like six locks on a nigga basement door.
Was this the Chinese nigga?
Nah. White niggas. Or something.
I told you!
Fuck.
It was the other house.
Yeah, nigga, whatever.
So what happened.
So Slime comes in and we swept the first floor, pulled like sixty bucks nigga and I ain't even keep that shit so anyway we pop the nigga basement door and go down the stairs and there's, like, another door down there on one side, and one side is just like white nigga builder shit or whatever, but then to the right, a door with like four locks, nigga, but this bitch was a pre-hung so I just Bruce Lee kicked that shit twice and nigga, Drano looked over at Slime who was looking at his feet and still had the stocking over his face as if oblivious of it there, I don't know.
I don't know.
What the fuck happened.
Tonto turned around in his seat. Yeah, nigga, what the fuck.
It was hell. It was like hell or some shit. Skulls, nigga.

The fuck is you talking about, Drano? Both men flicked their eyes to Slime and neither's glance did he meet and no word did he speak.
Like, skulls and shit, nigga. Skin. And there was a second door inside that room. One lock, pre-hung.
The fuck you talking about homie? Slime, what the fuck is this nigga talking about. Yo. Nigger!
Nigga, shut your bitch ass mouth, Drano said from the backseat, I'm telling you what the fuck happened if you would shut your dumbass mouth.
Nigger, you're talking about skulls and shit.
This white nigga had skulls and like insides and shit and skin in this room, on God, nigga.
Slime shook his head derangedly in agreement and the men in the front seat noted this and quietened at once.
It was like hell or some shit. Some sick white nigga shit. So I kicked the second door, because I'm like fuck this weird shit, now I really want to find this freak's safe and it popped and some naked white bitch with fucking, like, holes in the front of her shit, nigga, like all across her shit here, and a snake nigga on the ground, on God, I nearly shot the bitch, like I was so close to shooting this bitch when she came stumbling at me that I'm tripping like I shot her.
You aint shoot no white bitch, Drano, right? Tell me you ain't shoot no white woman on a flock.
He ain't shoot her, Slime volunteered unexpectedly in a hushed monotone, Nigga had his finger on that shit off the back, though, and Slime coughed and slumedp back down in his dreadlock stufffed stocking, gazing blank and slack chinned through the floor of the car.
I ain't shoot the bitch. We fucking scooted, nigga.
Ain't no bitch living with holes in her shit, Drano. You tripping nigga.
This nigga aint even take his pop out of his pocket for this shit, Tonto said across the front. Nigga is tripping for real.
Slime was still staring at the carpeted floor through the labrynthian nylon grid of stocking, between thatches of huge loosed half bleached dreadlocks that had shifted to the front in his flight like small sloth arms sliding around to the front of his head. Waffle glance over his shoulder and switched lanes and the sun slanted through the windscreen and fell splashing yellow white and slotted across Slime's form and it vanished to cold black passing under a bridge and again he was lit up as they came out at length under the sun again and Drano looked across at him and said, Tell these niggas.
This nigga is tripping, Waffle said.
He ain't tripping, Slime said, I was there. The bitch had holes, like, holes nigga, across her forehead. You could see down in them. The shadow or some shit. Like tubes or some shit. Like pink, nigga, and - and - like dried blood. And she was alive. She was alive, nigga.
Nigga, if you got shot in your dome four times. Do you think you living? How many niggas we know survive headshots?
Nah, man, Slime said, sitting up slightly. This was like a powerdrill or some shit, like her shit wasn't all bust up like she got hit up. It was like tunnels. You couldn't do it with a gun.
What the fuck, nigga. Both of you niggas is tripping.
Tonto, Drano said from the backseat, I got cigarettes in the dash.
Tonto leaned forward woodenly and begrudgingly and he pulled the small handle of the slanted enclave and the door swung down and a green pack of cigarettes slid in the wedge near the

handle and these he took and tossed blindly over his left shoulder and Drano caught them and fumbled with the pack and plucked one from the rows and asked Slime for his lighter and Slime slid the red plastic lighter across the leather seats and Drano took it and spun the spark wheel and deeply he pulled from the flame and exhaling Waffle rolled down his window a few inches with his left hand and Drano leaned against it in his confusion and horror and the feeling upon him as if still in that room, spiders crawling about his person and he thought of the snake, how it looked at him from behind her legs and hiss as if in recognition of him and he prayed silently thanking God for staying his hand, for it was true he had almost shot clean the ruined head off the woman and he smoked silently in the rushing wind and sunlight as they passed along through the confusion of highway and the pistol he slid now into his hip pocket and Slime followed suit at his left and Drano asked Waffle if they counted the take and Tonto turned and grinned and said it was all skulls and blood and he laughed and Drano said that he had not asked Tonto and Waffle said it was like probably forty bands after they took the jewelry to the A&P and whatever was in the safe and Drano felt relief and said, I told you, niggas.

Yeah, the two houses on the right, nigga.

Nigga, shut the fuck up.

Andy Chang ain't drilling holes in white bitches, that nigga dies at his desk and follows the law.

I don't know, nigga, Drano said, exhaling, I don't know.

They drove in silence and sunlight and the car was warm and the wind whipped against it aggressively and ran rushing along the curves of the roof of the car and there was a police cruiser passing at their left and all the men felt the same dead silence within them at the sight of this and in this state they so remained until the full passing out of sight of the officer. Drano slipped his cigarette out of the wedge of vacuuming sky and it flipped rushing back through the air and he stare hard at his hands and closed them and opened them and he looked up and out the window to the right as he spoke.

Nigga, we gotta go back and help that bitch.

Slime sat up. Nigga, I ain't going back near that shit.

Waffle said. The fuck is you talking about, Drano.

That bitch is going to end up killed. We left her, nigga. With a snake.

Slime had fear in his eyes. Nigga, we busted the whole shit. It's unlocked now. She ain't locked in. She can leave.

Nigger, she has holes in her head.

Then she fucked anyway, Waffle said.

Yeah, maybe, Drano said. But this white nigga is going to kill her or keep her ass in that room for like three years or some shit.

Nigga, she left.

Nigger, the bitch is retarded and naked you think she at home already showered up and shit?

I'm not going back, Slime said.

I'm not driving your weird ass back, nigger, Waffle said from the front seat and he accelerated and Drano looked out the window at the scenery as it morphed from bucolic to vines and gates and rough brown fields and small stucco houses, encircled doubly by gates and alleyways all tan and white and pavement, and peeling billboards and unlit store signs and gas stations and corner stores and he said, No one is going to help her, and Waffle shook his head and looked to Tonto

smirking and pulled rightward onto the exit gliding across the shark skin colored and white-fletched highway and they all tilted forward into their belts down the exit ramp and there was not another police cruiser since the last one and none to be seen yet and all of them felt the same silence in them as before returning to the city for task forces had been deployed across the county for flocking in particular as of late and no unmarked car came to sudden life and now their hands upon their pistols at each stoplight, slumped and assessing neighboring vehicles, and through the static distortion of late afternoon and the muted whomp of distant speakers did they slide uninterrupted by the law into the arms of the A&P whereupon these precious metal wares and stones still fragrant of their owners were exchanged for a stack of bills totaling fifteen thousand dollars and the men added this to the total cash found in a pillowcase in the trunk and then drove again six blocks east to Drano's, popping the safe with a crowbar on the carpet, dividing the take four-ways upon his bed, and each man did slip twenty-thousand dollars into his pocket standing near lost in the cup strewn room. Drano stood thumbing through his money. The bills were blue grey and crisp and he flicked through the pad of bills and slid it half catching into his pocket and he thought of the woman tottering out naked and the holes that caught for a moment before him the red and orange pass of light and the crankled pink lining of her hind brain did he see down those tunnels that ran nigh to the back of her skull and the sky was pinkening with the orange and peach in relief upon the bottom of the clouds and through the tear in the blind could he see a bit of fencing enshadowed and a gate and an indeterminate potion of pale white wall beyond that was darkling as the sun lowered. The men stood in the cluttered room slouching in a semicircle like men divining from the bottom of a well. Drano fingered again the bills in his pocket. A hot glow overtook him at the shoulders and he felt a seizing within all the blood of his body. He stepped to the bed and turned out his pockets onto the swirling red plaid comforter of his unmade bed and thereupon he set his effects: pistol, cough syrup, twenty-thousand dollars cash, and a green pack of cigarettes. He spun on the soles of his shoes and scanned the room, eyes wild and blushing with heat. He looked to the other three men there, watching him: Nigga, I can't find my fucking phone.

XIX

Ruggles was standing in the dark of his kitchen smoking a cigarette and doing so regretfully as he stared out the splotched glass window at his backyard and the neighborhood lane beyond. The streets were still wet with rain and pale jewels did tink there on the glittering cyan pavement and, breathing from the cigarette, smoke swam clustered and white from his jowls as if scooped from cotton and it snorkeled out and hung lazily in the galleyed kitchen's airway between his eyes and the ceiling. The night wind swarmed a high screech against the glass of the enshadowed fenestration and cold he felt in the marrow of his skeleton beneath the tracksuit and, cigarette dangling from quivering lips and muscles clenched, he padded out of the kitchen and across the demolished wooden floor of the living room and, passing into and out of the dark blue spectrum of light fogging cubically and irregular from the digital projector, he groped through cerulean gradients of blindness through the ruins for planks of wood and papered trash and cardboard and all of these Ruggles coveyed lumbering to the fireplace and arranged more or less helter skelter therein. He returned to the kitchen and fetched the lighter and trotted again through the wave lapis lazuli and trundled down and knelt before the fireplace and held a lighter under the grate and his hand passed along the newpaper colored accumulations of ash fallen stacked

weightlessly there and he flicked the wheel of the lighter and from the top of the chimney could be seen the slightest flame trembling and bowing tawny and a crumpled piece of mail accepted the flamule and it transferred and the paper ball inflated then constricted, copper light within glowing and nigh slithering about the surface of the paper itself beneath the iron logrest, and all the cognate materials thereunder began to flare and hiss and suck quietly. The terracotta effulgence sorted through the tinder below the wood planks and carboard, crackling gently, and there was a sudden resonant whoop of flame when the cardboard caught the flame and alit hugely between variously hacked and pried pieces of the wooden floor below him. The firelight lit Ruggle's face in a crazed aspect. His eyes doubled the rising flames as they climbed senselessly like a mess of bright orange yellow iguanas up the stonewalls of the fireplace. He righted himself and turned and lowered his own cold and wooden form to set upon the hearth. Ruggles shimmied his back closer to the expanding flames and into the cobalt Cherenkov's glow of the projector he did tunnel his eyes as if it might represent some manner of portal out of which a Saint or druid might materialize and guide him confidently out of this clutching and wretched heap.

The projector was plugged into the townhome's last working electrical outlet, and into the outlet's second slotting Ruggles had one unit from a pair of walkie talkies. Some dame having carried off the other forever along with any known affections for his person. It sat on the charging port in black plastic splendor with a small red light glowing to indicate it was properly charging.

There was crackling and candescent suction at his back and he glanced back and saw that the wooden slats from the floor had accepted the flames and Ruggles sighed in relief and soon a quivering sheet of warmth hung like soft melting glass upon his back and the fire roared behind him and the flames rendered cast a frenetic and lurid slack light across the living room and it smelled of woodsmoke and burnt paper and Ruggles sat blinking watching as these flames threw their light about his sides into the room in such a manner. A dog barked hoarsely from another house unseen. Ruggles blew into his hands and rubbed his palms together and looked about the room. The fire at his back lent light all about the floor and he stood from his warming and moved through the scattering citrus light, gathering up more debris. Planks of flooring. Drywall cutouts.

He began stacking these on the hearth before the fireplace, drifting through the wild light, and he thought of his daughter, Dolphin. Child's mind of soft forms and kind colors and a sing-song epistemology. She a child of six years now. My little sisterly severed.

Ruggles had not seen Dolphin since their trip to the California coast, some nine months before, and recalling this period and region, the fragrance of saltwater and bloated fish washed ashore dead and the smell of sand itself and he understood himself to be superpositioned at a crossroads of sorts. And neither direction available to him did he understand nor could he foresee anything desirable upon any path that led forward into time. Behold him flickering orange in receipt of the firelight and moving stiffly about the room like a damned creature, consolidating the rest of the broken wooding flooring by the hearth. Flames rippling backwards with a perpetual and low roar as if these leaping flamules represented some kind of perfect teleologic inversion of seawaves. Behold him now, pale bronze lit and quavering. Brow furrowed. The blood within me was this not the blood with which I was born. Is my child's blood still within me? And Ishmael and his

mother were banished away at the birth of Isaac as wanderers through interminable and sunpummelled sand, through invective and loathing, and toward Mecca did they slouch, mother and son. Huddled in rags at periphery and exiled from the scene of birth directly as the elected child fell screaming and purple from Sarah's aged loins.

When the voice came over the walkie talkie, Ruggles thought he was being arrested again, and every living part of him did flicker particulate and numb and discrete in the orbit of blue fog and firelight and, seeing no splashing revolutions of red or blue, and no officers upon him, the voice drift out again acoustically cubical into Ruggles firelit living room and he walked slowly towards the radio as if profoundly bewitched. The manner in which a parent might approach their Satanically possessed child speaking in tongues in the proxied articulation of legions. Taking the walkie talkie from the port, he gazed at the grooved black plastic as if it held some great secret within and again he lumbered back across the rooom with it and sat carefully down upon the now established warmth of the stone hearth. He sat silent there cradling the walkie talkie. Waiting for some flash of static and another utterance. Firelight swirled at his back and colorfully garlanding his dark seated silhouette as if with a thousand living orange lilies. Crickets could be heard through the windows in performance of their dragging signals. Grass came to singing life itself in the cricket perhaps. The voice chopped out of the plastic grooves again and Ruggles nearly leapt from his seat.

Nigga, I told you to keep it on Channel 3. And say over, nigger. Over.

This nigga got cameras, Drano.

Say over, nigga.

Over.

Ruggles eyed the walkie uncertainly. He spun the dial and it clicked along circularly until the line on the knob aligned with the number three and he sat the walkie down on the hearth beside him and rest his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees, and hunger and weakness compelled his body away from the flames and this posture and he trot across the now largely cleared floor to the kitchen. There were two cans of small white beans in the cupboard and both of these did he take and peel the lids from and shake downward slopping into the scorched black curvature of a small steel pot, and he stood there cubicled again in the dark, watching the stove's coil come to life in gradients of orange and he stood watching the beans steam and tremble in the cold shadows with a perceptual state arguably resembling something like attention. He slipped away from this and slant into the dark of the bathroom and he fumbled blind through the darkness and manipulated the chilled metal of the dryer and he opened the door and fished about for and finally found in harshly knotted capacity a hooded sweatshirt, tie-dyed and without logo or graphic. He flapped it out of its entangled condition and raised it up above him like a child just born and he dove upward through the darkness into the cottony sail flap of the garment and stumbled out of the blackened bathroom still dressing back and around the corner back into the kitchen. Ruggles cowled the hood up over his head and it billowed there softly about him and, bending encloaked with his nose to the steaming cauldron, he looked like some kind of abstruse psychedelic alchemist presiding in the fog over his brewing potions. Firelight fluttered orangely and curved about the corner, half lighting the kitchen in a fragmented and unreliable aspect.

Ruggles watched as the beans came to a full boil for a moment and he reached over and flicked the nob of the element to off and the brilliant orange coil began darkling backward through its accumulating gradients.

Ruggles slid the pot off the element, covering his hand from scald of the pot's handle with the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and he nudged it onto the wood laminate counter beside the stove. He turned and rifled through a dark drawer of clanging metal and another, and he cursed and opened the dishwasher and leant into that shadowy white chamber and blindly fished from a stand therein a spoon of imitation gold and he stood in the dark of the kitchen, eating his first meal not prepared by the state. Standing and staring out the window at the rows of blackened and curtained windows across the street. Woodenly spooning the steaming legumes into his mouth. Arm rising and falling with an occasional clink on the coping of the iron crockery. There is no shortage of dark nor cold for he whosoever has been selected for a life of terror and suffering. Nor is there any shortage of superfluous heat for this particular man of elect, as well.

Ruggles conveyed the still warm pockmarked pot to the sink and he procured another cigarette from the kitchen drawer. He labored out of the kitchen with the unlit cigarette and, taking from the fire a piece of wooden planking half ablaze, did he light it and exhale and restore the wood to the fire, positioning it at a half tilt, triangulated against the frolicking mass of flame. He ascended the stairs in three hops and, looking down from the landing, as if for the first time, he scratched his head and said, What the fuck is wrong with me, and upon his heels did he spin tumbling into the melancholy endless penumbra of his bedroom.

Nothing moved therein not even a shadow so dark was the upstairs, and Ruggles guided himself blindly along the door jamb into his bedroom, following the wall with the very prints of his fingers until his knees came in soft collision with the bed, and upon this mattress he folded forwardly and exhausted like some horrendous and huge piece of origami, and fully clothed did he burrow beneath the massive form of the comforter. He lay staring into the darkest corner and God he could not see there nor could he see Satan, and neither could he discern any order in the buckling and malformed shadows enshrining him, bowing and flexing in black grey expansion and contraction. Puddling evily in the corners. He pulled the comforter over his head and lay breathing there and wondering and his breath started warm and fog the crumpled dome in which he hid and his eyes rolled and stayed them and they rolled again and turned on his side and his eyes closed and he dreamt himself floating, as if in the sea but blackness all about him, and a staircase polished oak hung before him there in formless space, backlit galactically with spatters of purple and blue and cosmic latte and Ruggles hung there in the dark lacquered and the stairs were adorned and carven all about their planking and handrails with patterns now relics, and the vacuum within which he float regarding this shifted momentously on a sudden and Ruggles watched as his daughter and her mother now ascending and descending the stairs together. Dolphin smiling and waving to him. Laughing and skipping up and down. Her mother angled over her in correction. Ruggles willed his hand to wave and found he could not move in his suspension, only spectate, and some invisible dark force at his fore emerged and swam him rushing back through black space away from the stairwell and the light blue freezing stars rushed by him on either side and he woke in the drowsy yellow afternoon of the next day and, after some limited cunctation and sweatslaked sloth, he removed himself to the master bathroom to urinate and, conveying himself back to bed in the same stacked garments, he slept for the greater

part of a month. Leaving rarely and laboriously for coffee and tobacco and beans and these alone.

Ruggles was still in bed when the doorbell rang, and he had his head under the blanket willing this visitor away as the door then began to resound with a hard hollow knocking that carried jarringly through this uninterrupted house of death and sorrow and the weather had warmed a bit and he pulled the comforter away aggravatedly and half-delerious and yelled, Hold on, and stumbled out of the room and from the landing at the top of the stairs he watched with huge terrorized eyes as the door itself shook convulsively with the severe knocking and he scrambled down the stairs and shook his head again at the state of everything within him and without and he opened the front door and Wayne stood there, looking to the left and, continuing knocking motions into thin air, he nearly fell inward as Ruggles opened the door. He looked up at Ruggles, smiling hugely.

Nigga, what the fuck, you said you was gonna hit me up?

Ruggles started laughing.

Where'd you go, nigga? That shit was boring as fuck after you bailed out.

I guess I'm just. Here, Ruggles said, and he held his hand out and up in a grand gesture at the brokenness all about him. Wayne looked suspicious and swept past him into the house without invitation and started pacing the first floor, studying the bashed in walls and the pried up flooring. The torn wires and bashed in ceilings. Wayne walked up to the digital projector and placed a hand on it as one might a small and cowering puppy and he block the blue light with his palm and slide his hand away and it washed out again neon almost the color of sky and he covered it again and his face changed and he looked to Ruggles.

Nigga, what the fuck is you living like?

I destroyed my house.

Why?

I don't know. I was fucked. Or I'm fucked. How'd you find me, Wayne?

What nigga! You gave me your address like twenty times. You said there was like a lost book of the bible in the walls or some shit, nigga, and. And. What the fuck you call it? A monolisp?

A monolith.

The fuck a monolith is.

I guess it's like a indestructible structure that stands above nature and outside of it, as a symbol.

The fuck you saying, nigga?

I don't know. I'm fucked.

Where this book at, nigga, which wall? He started pacing around looking at the walls, testing them with the back of his knuckles. Ruggles stood squinting in the early Spring light that slept the afternoon sun in through the skylight and the living room windows and he sat on the hearth, yawning and watching Wayne tumble about from destroyed wall to destroyed wall, knocking at the intact portions and leading with his ear for the hollows and the studs and Ruggles sat up and said, Wayne, and Wayne turned from the wall, and Ruggles said, There's no book, man, and Wayne frowned and he bounced toward Ruggles gingerly over the floor of the living room in a swamp of green sweatsuit so enormous that it did gather some six folds at his quarters and through this murky emerald fluid did he move, eyes bright with friendship. He came near and sat

on the chair next to the projector and he gestured with his chin to the stairs and Ruggles shrugged.
Nigga, you down to three stairs?
Yeah.
I seen niggas get down to, like, eight, maybe five, but nigga you got three stairs.
Ruggles laughed.
Damn, Wayne said looking at it, I never seen a nigga get down to three stairs. And you ain't fall through yet?
Ruggles shook his head, still laughing at the spirit of this gnome like child of neglect and violence.
I haven't fallen through yet, Ruggles said, and he knocked upon the wood of the floor below the hearth.
You got a bitch, Wayne asked, jouncing on the first of the three stairs.
Yeah, I got like five bitches in rotation right now.
Wayne leaped off the first step, his eyes bright with belief. Shut up, nigga, for real? You got pictures?
Bro, I'm kidding. I don't have a bitch. I don't have anything.
Wayne looked around in assessment again, sweatsuit sloshing about him like in living olive.
This ain't a bad spot, though, nigga.
It's fucked, Ruggles said. I destroyed it.
Can't no one kick you out the bitch, though, nigga. And it got a roof. You got electricity?
I got like two outlets and the kitchen. No lights. Ruggles flicked his head at the projector. Just that.
Where the book at, you ain't sell it already did you, nigga?
It's not here. Ruggles pointed to every caved in or cut wall. I checked everywhere.
What the fuck was you saying about a monolith?
I thought there was a monolith here. Like that the house was built around it.
Nigga you weird as fuck. That tranny bitch turnt out to be a real nigga, Ruggles. She slept Conan the Barbarian or whatever that bald nigga, the Ronald McDonald looking nigga that ran the whites. Slept him on the deck. Out.
You're kidding me.
She dropped that nigga like a hot pan, my nigga. He ain't even get a lick in.
Ruggles stood up from the hearth and paced likewise. What the fuck happened?
They dragged her ass to the cage for a twenty-four, because the nigga said some sexual shit to her or something so they let her out.
What about the cracker?
Nigga came to mumbling and crying, nigga, and he was saying that the bitch sucker punched him. That weird ass bitch ain't sucker punch shit. They was lined up. The nigga was pushing her.
I gave her your address.
You what?
I gave her your address. I ain't no how heavy this monolith shit is gonna be, nigga. I can't go home to my mama, nigga, and what? Ask her boyfriend or some shit to help us move it. Nigga please.

Ruggles stood in awe of the pathetic and banished collection of derelicts with which he was now in satellite. He said, Holy shit.
What?
Nothing.
You find the book?
There's no book. There's no monolith.
Aiight, where's my room, nigga.
What. Your room?
Yeah, nigga, I got bags outside still. The bitch is gonna need a room, too.
What. Wayne.
I'm a take the second bedroom upstairs, Wayne said, and he went to the stairs again and said he couldn't believe that Ruggles was down to three stairs and that he had seen others get down to five or so but never three and he moved like a spider monkey swiftly back through the front door, crossing back over the threshhold with a heavy black garbage bag in each hand, and smiling he contorted his body past Ruggles and began the launch and swap of his ascent. The bags going up tossed before him. He following. Ruggles heard the downstairs as Wayne entered the second bedroom, and he heard him talking to himself and then Wayne was at the landing again and he said, Nigga, this shit is made for like a three year old bitch.
Yeah, man, I have a daughter.
Nigga you crazy, Wayne said, and his frolicking dreadlocked head retracted out of view and he pounded about the room above Ruggles removing his effects from the bag and folding his clothes, stacking them in the corner according to item type. Ruggles stood downstairs and he felt the very thawing of his bones in the house now warmed by the early afternoon sunlight and winter had passed it seemed, and he went to the window and parted the curtains and there were house finches feeding in the grass of the front yard about the base of some boxwoods and they skipped along through the tufted green spikes and he watched the sun as if entranced hanging there in the sky in a perfect white circle framed by clouds and there was a sudden furious chirping from the finches in the grass and he could hear Wayne singing to himself upstairs softly and the sound of furniture being slid above him followed and he thought of telling Wayne to leave the room as it was, but it did not matter and he knew this and he allowed the boy to make himself something of a home there out of this ruined flophouse. He stood blinking, thinking of the boy's simple gratitude. That they could not be removed as squatters and that a roof hung over their heads. Ruggles let the curtain fall and the room washed again with shadow where sunlight had just been like black fluid and Ruggles went to the kitchen and fetched water from the tap and stood staring and blinking out of the window at the backyard. There were three thumps at his back and he heard the quick rasping and slap of Wayne slanting around the barren living room and Ruggles leaned out of the kitchen and saw the boy's young eyes rolling in crazed search for Ruggles and when they found him the boy waved, as if just seeing one another now, and walked over.
Why you ain't tell me we was chillin' over here now?
I'm just getting some water.
Lemme get some, nigga.

Ruggles from his position leaning against the counter and without looking did reach with one arm and extract a pint glass from the cabinet at his right. He turned and filled the glass and it was clouded at the bottom, and Wayne took it and drank, looking wildly about the kitchen in inventory and taking up opposite Ruggles in the selfsame stance.
You got hot water, nigga?
We don't have hot water. I cut the cord.
Wayne scoffed. Nigga where the cord at?
Ruggles gestured as if indicating some area about his right shoulder.
Where it at, nigga?
It's in the laundry room.
What you got a laundry room, nigga?
Yeah, it's in the hall bathroom and then all that shit is tucked in the back there.
Where it at?
Around the corner.
Wayne moved gnomelike in his slack green garments around the corner, green hooded with wild cylindrical bundles of hair spilling about his neck as if he wore locks of the untended mane of some mythic beast of war, and into the bathroom's slight shadow he disappeared and Ruggles heard him shortly thereafter talking to himself and soon he emerged again into the kitchen query sharpening his eyes.
Nigga, what you cut out all them wires for? That's how yo hot water heat work.
Yeah, Ruggles said, I was geeking.
Like you was taking drugs?
No. I was. Out of my mind.
That's crazy. You crazy, nigga. Yeah, I'm a twist that shit back together. We need hot water, nigga. Nigga got shower.
You think you could fix it?
Wayne laughed and threw his hands up. Mane, niggas would tear the motherfucking wire out of a baby if there was one in there. Niggas always be cutting wires, pulling at em and shit. Then a nigga like me gotta come along and twist that shit back together.
You been shocked before?
Fuck, yeah, I've been shocked, nigga. Not like no cold shower or some shit, though.
Ruggles was laughing. You think you can fix it?
Wayne shook his head vigorously and said, niggas always be tearing out wires and shit and a nigga like me got to come along and twist that shit back together. I'm a get it poppin', nigga.
Ruggles laughed and the sunlight slanted over his shoulder like a javelin and laughing still he watch as this encloaked brown skinned leptosome pitter pattered again out of the kitchen, his enormous garments swooshing, and into the lower bathroom out of sight from where Ruggles stood leaning and grinning. The house was warm and the whole of the bottom floor was awash with incessant and magnificent pale yellow sunlight that waxed mighty from the heavens and fell therefrom into this ruined home, warming that upon which it fell perceptibly and Ruggles gazed blankly at the light's entrance and traced the wavelengtths to where it curved in through the sliding glass back door and fanned out and up along the walls and slid upon the floor, creeping under and demonstrating in soft white effulgence a sheet of dust upon the woodslats so level and

white that it seemed the accumulate of a single night. The walls were limestone grey where they did not host trembling cuboids and ovals of light and where the sheetrock had not been hacked away or stove in, and Ruggles brought his hand to his eyes and rubbed the actual orbiting balls therein from over the eyelids and he stood blinking again there in the kitchen, dust hung slant and individuated before him like processional souls in wait, and Ruggles turnt to face the window again and over the sink he reached and pushed at the pane and it yielded and the window swung outward and soft spring air was upon his face at once and it was neither cold nor warm and it smelled of pitch and lavender and cherry blossom. The felt green and fleshy leaves of the small maple twisting out of the grass of his backyard trembled softly in the wind and ground quartz in the pavement of the neighborhood lane glinted the color of starlight. A murmuration of starlings simple and black met his ear from the branches of a neighbor's spruce tree and he looked skyward and level-bottomed clouds mythic white and swirling hung enormously in the carrot colored light and a hawk tunnelled across the gradient blue sky below and Ruggles watched it hunt and swoop until out of sight. A neighbor across the street shuffled out of her red lacquered fencegate in slippers and a showercap and Ruggles watched as she deposited a newspaper into a grey steel trash can and returned the lid to the metal coping with arms trembling and vanished again behind the gate. Ruggles trot out of the kitchen and across the negotiable flooring and he went to the curtains at the front of the house and threw them open again and squinting sunlight leveled him and dust swirled about his person, a million sun-edged fleck clamoring as weightless as thought, and the floor creaked as he made his way over to the bathroom's doorjamb and leant against it, studying the boy in genupectoral agreement with the tile laminate, dark hands working spiderlike in the shadows of the water heater and nigh invisible, for the gathering of his sleeves was such that his digital manipulations were curtained from the viewer, and there bent to the ground suchlike before the huge cauldron with his brindled dreadlocks spilling about he looked like some kind of forest creature made to repent, huddled at the foot of a metal totem. Ruggles spoke from the door.

What do you think? You got it?

Wayne did not look away from his efforts. He said, Nigga, why you tear these wires out? This how this bitch work, you know?

I don't know, Wayne. I was tripping.

Wayne sat up suddenly in his flowing robes in the outer dark of the bathroom, and Ruggles watched the boy as he allowed himself up by the ridge of the washing machine and, righting himself, he stood rubbing his hands together and softly clapping the dust from them, hands rising and falling alternately as if he were clopping erasers from a chalkboard.

Done.

Seriously?

Told you I would get it poppin' my nigga, didn't I?

Ruggles laughed and granted the small elfen creature passaged in his mantle of marsh green cotton and they stood in the light of the living room breathing and with no real next step in any direction for the either one of them. A penumbra of flowering dogwood trembled blackly in relief against the far wall against an irregular and swiveling cuboid of white yellow afternoon light that warmed its referents there cast in light and dark. Wayne gestured around him at some of the various points where the grey and eggshell colored walls had been cloven and bashed.

You ain’t find no Bible and sell it without me, right?
No, Wayne. Unfortunately when I bailed out I discovered that there was not, in fact, a lost book of the New Testament in the walls of this house.
What’s the New Testament?
That’s the part of the bible that tells the story of Jesus.
Wayne rolled his eyes crazily around the room, searching the walls again.
You check everywhere, nigga? You sure? He walked flapping in his sweatsuit to the wall and his hooded head disappeared into the nearest aperture to him where Ruggles had cut the drywall away. Ruggles walked again to the front window that opened into his living room. House finches pale red and twitching preened suspiciously in the shadows of the dogwood, looking all about them and shuffling their wings spastically, dancing across the sun warm grass and bowing their beaks and skipping and lifting as a group in sequence, as if invisibly manacled to one another, and taking to the warming sky and burrowing through the shift and slant of wind and light over the increasingly miniature and slowed earth and taking up in the boughs of a tree in a bowl of pitch and twigs and small, warm blue and grey flecked eggs. Wayne was ping-ponging between each vandalized wall, presumably still looking for the book in the event that Ruggles missed it. Ruggles watched as an enormous gourd shaped cloud dragged tremendous and bulbous across the sky into his line of sight, the bottom of the cloud washing in revolutons, and the whole of it spinning imperceptibly on the wind’s axis. It passed before the sun and a greater shadow raced across the naked earth from the horizon forward and fell upon Ruggles there at the window. The room cooled and Wayne looked out from one of the walls at Ruggles back and this cloud, so great was it in dimension that this shadow did there hang until nightfall. The sun sunk gradually, and pink radial light traced the variously pocked and lumped cloudback and Ruggles called Wayne to the window to see this monstrosity hanging in the sky and Wayne stood small at his right and watched, his small mouth open and eyes wide, a half smile turning to Ruggles and back to the window. The sky was a distortion of gradients of metal and water. It was darkening perceptibly and Ruggles said, We’ve got to eat, and Wayne nodded and the two men padded their pockets and fetched out and ensured their possibles and they tumbled together out into the soft spring evening, unfurling with the ease of oil through the neighborhood and yards and driveways before them. As they walked the neighborhood streets, Wayne had to hold his sweatpants at the side, as if curtsying, so that they might not drag upon the paving. Ruggles looked at him and shook his head and they followed the sidewalk and the streetlights flickered on the cold color of drowned caucusoid flesh and they passed along and crossed out of the neighborhood and walked the side of a four lane highway, commuters mute and emotionless, hissing by in their vehicles various and shoe shaped, swiveling their heads at the pair and back to the road and their gaze automated and absent, and the boy asked how easy it was to steal from the grocery store they were going to and Ruggles told him that they were not going to steal anything, that he had limited access to savings again and Wayne asked if there were cameras and Ruggles told him again reiterated that they would not be stealing anything from this store or else they were going in separately and Wayne shrugged and bounced along the highway’s shoulder at his side and the branches swarmed and convulved in silhouette at their right above them and still yet beneath the massive ragged cloud’s shadow they moved and, cresting a hill, the luminescence and signage of industry rose up twinkling in green and yellow and red. Cars now in the further darkness reduced

to headlights alone. Ruggles and Wayne loped heavily across the highway and, crossing over the counter sidewalk and scrambling up a slope of grass, they broke at length into a parking lot of a grocery store. The parking lot largely spare of vehicles. Moonlight now of the palest blue hanging in counterpose to the gourd shape cloud and cooling watery blue light down upon them like ragged and unknowing baptismal candidates, and they passed over the white lined pavement of the parking lot and through a pair of sliding glass doors into an anteroom of the grocery store wherein there stood a cooler filled with bags of ice and a carboard frame within which chopped firewood was wrapped and divided in orange netting. A hispanic mother and her child passed the men at the threshhold and smiled and she scooted the boy around the men softly at his back, and they passed through a second set of sliding doors that buckled awake at sensing the men and into a lurid yellow light did they go lurching and squinting, fruit towerered on various stands overwhelmingly and the slightest automated mist in dispersion above the soft watery greens lain at a slant along the eastern wall and from these leafy things they shirked and shuffled along with their heads down, moving as if directed at gunpoint by some third party. The store's speakers played instrumental music grainily, as if the instruments were played at considerable distance from the recording microphones, and through this violent yellow distortion they went slumping along together, and Wayne was still holding up his pants at the waist, bobbing along with eyes huge and wandering all about the store and its stillfaced constituents. They arrived at a labryinthian row of isles and Ruggles turned and looked at Wayne and they paused there a moment at the mouth of this tunnel. Wayne was heisting up his pants and looking up at Ruggles.

That fits a bit small doesn't it?

Wayne shrugged and then looked to Ruggles and saw his expression. Nigga. Shut your bitch ass up. This shit is designer.

Where'd you get it?

I told you I hauled off on my untie and her man. I took it from him.

How fucking big was he?

That nigga huge. He held up his arms as if for evidence and the sleeves flopped and angled floorward over his hands.

How'd you take the two of them?

Ah, shit, Wayne laughed, I used a strap, nigga, whatchu think? I ain't finna fight no nigga six twelve. I slammed his bitch ass with the pole though.

Ruggles shook his head and gestured at a white man with glasses whose cart had led him, and all of his life, to the aisle at whose threshhold they stood and Wayne said, That nigga look like a straight dork, very audibly and the man jerked and scowled at them weirdly like an insect caught in some obscene act and he looked away suddenly and receded backward out of the aisle across the white brown chessboard laminate until out of sight. Looking back with viciousness at the last moment and disappearing from their lives forever.

There he goes, Ruggles said.

Right? That nigga looked like a straight nerd ass nigga.

Wayne. You look like a dog someone dressed up in their father's sweatsuit for a photo

Bitchass nigga, you dress like a wizard on his day off in the ghetto or some shit.

Ruggles was laughing. He flicked his chin through the fluid light at the shuttle of aisles before them and they passed hallucination-like and besorceled through the aligned levels of goods, their

colors rendered almost neon in the grotesque yellow flourescence and washing along as if a wave nudged them along through the aisles. Ruggles took cereal and beans and coffee from their various shelving as the men zig-zagged through the store, and Wayne asked if the oven worked at the house and when Ruggles said it did, he said, That's my nigga, and asked if they could get frozen premade French Toast and they passed along as if through an exhibition of misused color. Blue and red and yellow goods in their containers of cardboard and aluminum, all lettered and embossed with their various pandering graphics that spanned the advertising mediums from mere text to photographic images of real posed human beings, and Wayne passed his hand idly along the shelving as they moved between these rows of goods, oscillating at each counterpass, zig-zagging distractedly and antsy now through these patterned and prominent images and they reached an aisle of frozen and refrigerated goods, coolers stretching the length of it, and Wayne zipped of and in his face the freezer door clouded as Wayne pulled it free of its suction and he found quick purchase of high requested item and they walked together betwixt these whirring rows and broke at length into a slanted display of meat and cold cuts that ran the length of the grocery store's backwall, glowing toplit and flaxen, and this they followed along until reaching a cooler wherefrom Ruggles took a glass bottle of coffee and a glass bottle of milk. All of this he held partially cradled and hugged to his chest, and no sign of discombobulation did he show shopping about in this manner without crate nor carriage. A day or two's goods always.

They wade through the pool of light toward the chirping clatter of the registers and their buzzing conveying belts and they moved like men through fire in suits inflammable and Ruggles, with a sort of bowed fanning of his arms, did let his goods settle on the rubber of the belt and Wayne at his back sent his arm through with the box of french toast and set it thereupon, as well. There were magazines and newspapers in a three leveled stand positioned like a sentinel at the threshhold of the register's narrow stand and Ruggles glanced back at this and read the text across the front of each, some mention of an active serial killer on the cover of each, and Wayne was looking over each of his shoulders alternately and all about him. His thin brown fists held clasped between his chest and shifting rubic-cube like as he assessed various dangers and opportunities about him, and Ruggles turned to the clerk as the belt jerked to startling life and dragged his goods, some tilting over leftward on their weight. He smiled at the female clerk. Ruggles spun in the narrow passage of the check out there and plucked four different chocolate bars, almost at random, from the rack of chewing gum and candy, and he asked Wayne to grab four sodas from the cooler stood counter to the the newstand at the aisle's entrance and Ruggles set the chocolate bars on the belt and Wayne, too, at his back did tumble recklessly four cans of refrigerated col in spite of their weight clattering and rolling onto the conveyance. Ruggles smiled at the clerk and apologized when she looked up, jarred by Wayne's placement of the sodas. She was a young woman and her blood hispanic and her skin the color of sand and she smiled shyly taking up the items. She kept her eyes averted and her dark hair fell before her face and she carried it back around her ear and scanned the items there one by one and conveyed them to a slate metal shore and her English was broken as she said the total sum and glanced at Wayne and smiled at him as if he were bonneted in a carriage behind Ruggles. The radio crackled and something unintelligible was announced over the grocery store's intercom system and of such single dimensions was the voice that one could not tell if it belonged to man or woman. Ruggles fetched his wallet and handed bills across and the clerk, looking away and digging through her

drawer, handed him a collection of different bills and disks of metal and these he took and replaced in his wallet and gestured with his head at Wayne and handed him a plastic bag of goods to carry and the pair passed through the repetitious melancholy of the store and their lives carried before them in their shadows upon the linoleum, weird and elongate and barely visible, and they passed through a set of buckling glass doors that opened at their progress into the original anteroom and passed the firewood and little quarter-fed red lighthouses of gumballs and toys. Wayne was low at his right, swooshing along and still eyes searching everything for criminal ingress and they sloped over through the final clasping automation of the entrance's sliding doors and fell dementedly back into cold elliptical lighting of the parking lot and they tottered together with their bags perpendicular to the white parking lines, soles scuffing, to the far side of the lot and Ruggles set his bags in the grass, breaking there in plateau and sloping downward to the sidewalk and highway.

Ruggles set down stiffly on the curb and Wayne asked if this is where they were chilling and Ruggles nodded in the affirmative and Wayne took up his prickly sandstone seat at Ruggles side and each pawed through the blue plastic of their respective grocery bags for some purchase therein and Wayne did there in the hooped light of yellow parking lot's lighting did open the carboard box of premade french toast and begin eating it in thus form, gnawing at the sides and looking around up furtively through the expanses of magnet black sky, the frayed white and yellow ghostly expulsion of lightstands, streetlights in the wild dark beyond transferring like slot machines from red to green in the dark. No cars passed their way from the skyline. In either direction. The moon shifted in the vaulting black sky away and cold light crept out across the tattered city like a wash of disinterred pale ghosts. Wayne worked away at these pathetic and thawing simulacrums of cream and egg soaked bread, and he smiled brightly at Ruggles incongruently with their quality and swallowed heavily and looked about him at the vacant parking lot. Orbs of vapor light cast yellow and obloidal from the poled and angled lanterns stretching up over the parking spaces, all of the heavens above and belows.

This town is dry as fuck, Wayne said, and he bit again into the softening cold of the false bread.

When'd you get out, Wayne?

Today, my nigga.

Where'd those trash bags come from?

Ah, shit! I had my shit hid up underneath a bridge like ten blocks from my momma house.

Got it.

That tranny gotta make do downstairs in the living room or some shit. I ain't doing no gay shit, sharing that bedroom with no weird ass nigga dressed like a bitch.

You better watch that talk, Wayne, she is liable to drop your ass from what I understand. And that is something I can't see you carrying forward with in a healthy manner that does not end in prison.

What you said?

I'm kidding. Wayne. When is this chick getting out?

Wayne shrugged, chewing and looking around everywhere wildly, eyes orbiting in all directions as if this static and unpeopled scenery was constantly changing. He swung his huge eyes with dreadlocks whipping toward Ruggles.

Nigga, why you got that bedroom upstairs all gay and shit? Like princess shit and unicorns, nigga.
That's my daughter's room.
You got a kid?
Wayne.
That's right, my nigga. That's right.
The wind shift and carried with it the flapping of batwings and the smooth shuttling of owl across the deteriorating evening sky. The gourd shaped cloud still hovered weirdly above all of the neighborhood, as if taking possession of it, and the moon hung at counterpoint waning gibbous in staggering grey white clarity with the vertices of the treeline beneath in triangular and gnarled silhouette and the highway was ghost like at their backs and there was trash strewn all about it and greasy papers flipped gently in the sand colored and bowed nooks of stone set along the roadside. Small plastic bottles of liquor of the same make. Unidentifiable flecks of paper waste and various packaging scuffing along in the wind and condom wrappers and soda cans and cigarette butts bundled in with the twigs and smaller strewn leaves in waves of brittle at the breaking kudzu. People going to and fro crazily through the day, their lives hardly even considered.
The men sat on the curb in the starlight. They had finished their dinner, or whatever that feeding there in parking lot represented, and they crumpled their trash away into the bags with the remaining goods and standing from the curb Wayne looked up at Ruggles with a single eye narrowed interrogatively.
You ain't got a TV, dog?
We have two outlets. No cable.
Nigga ripped out all them cable wires, too, huh?
Ruggles nodded affirmatively to this, looking down and across the highway over the shrieking treeline at the rows of descending and ascending roofs that zig-zagged in shingles across the valley below. His own roof somewhere among them. He looked down to Wayne. They stood at the grass slope that pitched downward in curvilinear suddenness onto the sidewalk.
Why do Black people rip wires out of shit?
I don't know. Nigga's tripping. Nigga's don't like machines.
What about pistols?
Ain't no wires in a pistol, my nigga. Not none of the straps I seen. Wayne was laughing.
You ever tear any wires out?
Ah, fuck yeah, my nigga!
Why'd you do it?
Ah, mane. Just tripping, my nigga. Tripping. Niggas would break an atom if they was tripping and could get they hands on it.
They scrambled down the slope and scuffed onto the sidewalk and half jogged across the highway, twin lights dragging off from the distance toward their forms. To the drivers of these vehicles the men looked like splotches of ink materializing atramentally and vanishing upon some dark scroll unfurled against the manilla light of the telephone poles and streetlight, and they manifest vampire-like on the sidewalk opposite, and Wayne eyed the twisting trees and their blackened clutching outlines suspectly and shifted around to walk to the right of Ruggles, the

closer to the highway, and silently they exchanged smiles in this movement and Ruggles looked down the hill, scanning the black and green irregular and punctured black, and orange hung warm from the backyard lights of the distant houses. He looked to Wayne.
Why do black people like to break stairwells?
Shiiiit. Why do you?
I thought there were spirits or something trapped in there. I had to ventilate them.
Well, there you go. Niggas got all kinds of reasons.
There you go.
They were pulled forward through the evening, the dark like a lake through which they waded, small cloaked figure bobbing and some monster to his right lurching along and hearkening the lilliputian one to his song. Black swarms in the swoop and in the whoosh of headlights, grotesque, looking up like mortified animals at the cars. Four wide eyes alighting neon green ringed and bullseyed with red horror. They passed along the roadside, scuffing their soles downward toward the neighborhood. The night air thin through their nostrils and limpid and fragrant with the greenery at their side and the faint smell of gasoline and motor oil spattered in a unrelenting boring forever along the roadway. Frogs could be heard in the bush at their left and further off therein did crickets hum alienly and they stepped together and when they went to step again the ground split, the sidewalk opening slightly, tearing between them and racing downward, and the men eyed eachother wildly as their respective sides of earth rose and swayed and they looked to one another across the grinding schism, clutching their bags and yelling silently into the accumulating roar called up from the lowest bowels of the earth where the very cornerstones of the planet shift in momentous scraping and they watched from their wild surfing sidewalks as the lights flickered across the horizon three times and shut off sequentially and then all at once and the foundational rocks of the earth churned slowly back down, buckling almost, and it set the sidewalk near where it had lain before but crooked and rent now and Ruggles and Wayne stood absolutely stunned and Ruggles said, What the fuck was that, and Wayne was laughing in the darkness crazily.
They could still hear deep in the sick stomach of the earth a sort of low stone groan or yaw. And upon the soles of their feet both felt in their respective manners that they could feel this, a sick feeling brewing up within them as if standing upon some huge dislocate human limb being reset. Red spectres materialized at four points on the horizon at their fore and and at their rear, as well, and soon orbital and sirened blue was seen and heard passing in far of whines over the curved and still trembling earth. Ruggles shuddered thinking that he trod upon some sensate and spasming creature, fractured and unrightable. Wayne was cackling wildly in the sudden expansion of black across the land like the very child of chaos himself. Dark was everywhere about them. Lightning tore downward from the sky at their left about a mile off and so staggering was the cornflower blue bolt that upon reaching the firmament, the visible world was in every direction lit up in a fantastic and grotesque ice blue tableau. They stood facing one another there on the spontaneously redistributed sidewalk, their aspect strange in the light, their bags from the suddenly blackened store still clutched at their sides. Car alarms began to sound from the edges of the horizon all about them and their paced screams raced inward as if toward a center and the men looked about stunned as yellow flashing eyes lit up across the scenery and rushed toward them like a marmalade calvacade of fire eyed demons. Ruggles looked to Wayne, still cackling

wildly amid the clamor of quarter-note paced horns honking and sirens weaving in from the circular skyline.
What the fuck just happened? Was that a fucking earthquake?
Nah, nigga, Wayne said. I just stepped too hard onto the sidewalk, my nigga.
Ruggles laughed.
You ain't been in no earthquake before, Ruggles?
What do you mean? We're on the east coast, Wayne. Have you?
Mane, this shit happen all the time.
Where?
Wayne shrugged and gestured at their general surroundings. Ruggles shook his head laughing and they began tottering down the rent sidewalk with the ruptured highway at their right. They could see from their crest through the tangle of trees as people in the houses below poured out into their driveways. And they watched as firetrucks converged on the skyline, moving in ninety-degree angles along the periphery and angling again through the invisibly dark streets and advancing down the highway, screaming beneath their oxblood light. Ruggles watched as the distant emergency vehicles started and checked in their advance, crossing the center lane where the highway had ruptured such as to block traditional passage, and he looked to the highway at their side and he studied in the moonlight how it had likewise swelled and fractured across its length and he tapped Wayne on the shoulder and flicked his chin at this and Wayne asked again if Ruggles was certain that he had not been in an earthquake before this and he again confirmed with Wayne that he had not, and bats that had dove screaming to their clutches waded back out again through the antic grey sky. A host of sparrows launched from the trees at their left and shuffled up fanning into the soft night breeze. They descend the hill, each nudging their florid and ornate sneakers at the various tears in the stone of the sidewalk and frowning. The air smelled of damp pitch and burnt stone and cold white freckling of stars had not moved above them and they tumbled further down the broken path, the villagers below visible now and enlarging in rearranging clusters in their driveways and yards, milling about in their slippers and mingling as if some answer lay in the word or in the place or in the person of their neighbor, though nothing lie within any single one of these things except the selfsame misled queries and impulse to congregate. Police cruisers shuttled by, freezing the men like sculptures to the sidewalk. Blue light sweeping over them and racing away at their backs and dread hanging like a great gaunt blackwinged bird in their stomachs. Wayne mumbled something inaudible in the overlap of siren and car alarms and they passed further down along the highway's edge under the ivory moon and both men did comment on the various adjustments of earth and stone beneath their feet and they descended the sloping paving of the path and came to a valley of sorts where they found the primary paved ingress to the neighborhood lifted from the earth in its quaking and lain twisting above the road now in curvilinear suspension like a craggy stone wave breaking and a great beard of mud and roots it did wear on the underside, tangled and dripping, and millipedes and woodlice still did scuttle frantically through this, unknowing they were held above the ground, and lizards of the earth and slithering things did there move plentifully in the cavity beneath and Wayne walked up to the edge of this spontaneous suburban abyss and its counterpoint wave and he smiled back at Ruggles and the moon hung behind him mastering the earth in vapor light and Wayne looked there swimming in his dark jade garments like some kind

of mudsprite scrambled up out of the earth after a thousand years of digging in his cloak of fern and leaves and pitch. Emerging in this very spot. He turned around, eyes glistering and rolling crazed with excitment.
My nigga, shit is popping off!
Yeah, well, that's the final word on the hot water then, isn't it?
Wayne's eyes rolled upward for a moment and he scrunched his face in calculation and then frowned and said, Mane, fuck, and he skipped a small childlike hopscotch from his perch at the twisted roadway, and through the limestone grey moonlight they passed along, suspiciously now, eyes flickering between the ground and the periphery as they entered the neighborhood proper and its mill of concerned pedestrians out in their driveways and lawns bearing flashlights and repeating themselves at length to whomever they made eye contact with, and bumbling around like terrifying automata and both the man and the boy lowered their eyes as they passed along over the sidewalk, through the oceanic night and the wailing clamor of sirens chattering behind them and car alarms in the distance minimizing gradually and they bobbed along the neighborhood lane and looked wearily down its paths into cul-de-sacs where searching eyes sought theirs out and they moved through the darkness wraith like and avoidant and switching back where going forward might force interaction and crossing over slopes of grass and lawns, and there was little interruption in the earth of the neighborhood and they broke at length through a thicket of clutching trees and branches into a yard and, crossing between houses, blue light wheeled above them suddenly and they went tumbling down a mulched descent and broke into the street and immediately a police officer was upon them and the source of the blue light clarified in the object of his cruiser angled at the entrance to Ruggles lane. The officer was a young man with a sort of robotic determination about the features of his face, with eyes that were of the clearest pale blue even there in the dark of the moonlight alone. His jaw was angular and he gritted it tight and his gaze was cold and intrusive and it flickered invasively between Ruggles and Wayne as if he had to choose one and one of them alone in that very instant lest both dematerialize or descend back into the earth. Neighbors on both side turned from their repetitions and watched blankly. Ruggles flicked a glance at Wayne in the blue light and his eyes were downcast, his face invisible in the oversized hood like some medieval child executioner awaiting the order. The officer was upon Ruggles first.
Where are you coming from?
Why?
There was an earthquake. It's protocol.
What's protocol?
To proceed with an investigation.
Okay.
So where are you coming from? He removed a small flashlight from the slotted sections of his belt and trained the strobe on Wayne and then Ruggles.
We went to the store.
Are you aware that we have just had an earthquake?
Nigga, where you think we coming from, white man?
What did you say?

The officer swung the flashlight on Wayne and Ruggles bore his eyes at the boy and the smooth black face receded back into the cave of the hood out of sight, then emitted. Nothing, sir. I was singing.
The officer trained the flashlight as a direct cylinder of light on Ruggles face from a distance of two feet.
What store did you go to? They're all closed. No power. What'd you say your name was?
It was before the earthquake.
What was?
We were in the store before the earthquake. The grocery up the hill. We walked back.
So you were inside the store, is that right?
Yes, we were inside of the grocery when we purchased these groceries.
Ruggles held up the bag. Wayne was frozen, puddled away mortified somewhere in his robes.
You have your license on you?
No, sir. I live in this house just yonder. We were getting snacks.
Which house did you say that was?
That one.
Ruggles pointed to the blue strobing slant of his driveway. The officer swung all the way around and trained the flashlight on the driveway and he furrowed his brow and ran the hoop of light across the surface and length of the crackling blacktop slope as if for verification of its permanence and the light swung back around into Ruggles eyes and squinting in the light he held up the bag again at the officer, as if for some kind of exculpatory evidence, and the officer clicked his light and slid it expertly into the polished leather holster of his belt like a secret sadist and he looked to Wayne again and bent some unselfconsciously to find his eyes behind the cloaking hood and the farrago of brown blonde dreadlocksm as if peering down some creature's burrow.
What's your name, bud?
Why you need my name, white man?
There was an earthquake. It's protocol.
Ain't no earthquake protocol harassing a nigga in his driveway.
The officer turned to Ruggles. Does the boy live here with you?
Ruggles nodded yes slowly watching the man's eyes, not understanding the implications of this admission .
The officer turned back to Wayne. Listen, big guy, your dad is going to get you inside and safe and then we'll take it from here.
Wayne looked up at Ruggles uncertainly. Ruggles jittered his eyes at Wayne to consent with this process.
Okay, thank you, Mr. White Man.
The officer turned on his heels and polished black they caught the blue spun light and held it like small clear ponds in their vamps and he strode cascading through the ghost light to his cruiser whereupon he looked back at the pair, squinting one final time, and opened the door and closed it from within and drove away at once. Wayne dropped the bag he was carrying, beans tumbling out and winding around heavily on the concrete.
Nigga! What the fuck!

Ruggles was laughing so hard that he was heaving and bowed over, lurching along up the driveway.
This nigga think I'm yo kid? He's fucking bugging. You white niggas tripping.
He couldn't even see you in there, man. Take it easy.
You know what I done in the street, my nigga?
He stepped close to Ruggles as if about to confide there at the threshold of the backgate. Ruggles held his hand up and closed his eyes softly as such to indicate to Wayne that it was unnecessary for him to legitimize himself in terms of his various unprosecuted real or speculative felonious actions. Wayne leaned in again as if to be certain of this, ready to confide, and finding the same response he waded along, hands invisible in the balloning sleeves and he shrugged and said, That white nigga was dumb as fuck, and they stood together, with bags twisting and spinning, as Ruggles fumbled with the keys against the scrambling hand of impenetrable dark and finding purchase and entrance of the correct key at the correct level, they broke at length into the dark house, as if it made any difference at all, and Ruggles swept away from Wayne without a word and leapt up the stairs and, crossing into his room, opened the chest in the corner wherein his store of surplus tablets over the years were kept. He shook three different pills into his hand and bounced them lightly as he bound back down the three final stairs and into the squat of a living room. He passed across the room and turned the projector to on and it hummed to life, having a charged battery, and first it gave off a faint yellow light, and then a fan was heard to begin in revolution and the blue light met the wall on the far side casting a wall of rich mineral cyan like colored fog. Wayne materialized in the cascading watery cuboid of light, grinning like some kind of apprentice genie whose performance on wishes was of dubious reliability.
I got some green in my bag, nigga.
For real? Let's do it.
Mane, are you kidding me? Shiiiit.
You need a flashlight?
Nah.
He evaporated out of the light and three light pads later could be heard pummeling around above as Ruggles passed into the kitchen and tossed the tablets into his mouth, lowering his head to the tap and turning the handle. He drank from the running water there and turn the squealing handle shut and swallowed and returned to the living room and, before he had set fully upon the hearth, Wayne is before him again, the whites of his eyes a deranged powder blue and his teeth bright in the digital light. Holding up a cone of tobacco leaf stuffed with cannabis and, lowering his arms into his pockets as if into a body of water, does he pull from those pillowy depths a plastic disposable lighter of yellow and deftly he spins the wheel with his dark little fingers and pull hard on the blunt and the cone lit a glowing orange coin and Wayne let the smoke tunnel down into and expand his lungs. He stood there blinking before breathing out a few pillowcases full of feathery smoke that hung in the air larger than his person. He passed the cigar to Ruggles and they sat there in the unfurnished and partially destroyed living room in the droning blank light and, though the windows were closed, both men could hear the indistinct murmur of neighbors still padding around in their spasms of concern, and the now almost forgotten throb of sirens and car alarms and Ruggles wonder if a neighbor might, almost robotically, begin in the direction of his house upon seeing the blue light, taking it for some kind of beacon. He looked about like a

paranoiac hermit and reassured himself of their position and Wayne took the blunt from Ruggle's white fingers and sat on the floor by the unlit fireplace and pulled from it to glowing cinnbar expansion, breathing deep and gradually exhaling. This gnomelike felon, this dark child of violence who for whatever reason had taken some essential imprint upon Ruggles person, indian style upon the bare wood floor in his rippling stolen sweatsuit. He looked up at Ruggles and smiled.

This shit gon' be poppin'.

What do you mean?

Watch. Niggas is gonna start popping off. Everywhere.

What. Because of the earthquake?

Yeah, nigga! Shit's gonna get cracking.

Ruggles shook his head and laughed and he passed the cigar back down to Wayne from his seat on the hearth and he nodded to the windows and stood up and Wayne shuffled up from the floor and they walked to the sliding glass doors in the back and watched as these legitimate citizens and neighbors wandered searching crazed through the evening black and all of its revisions. The entire first floor was silent as they stood there and the smell of cannabis was rich and sour and earthen in the air and the glaze and set of the glass came into view with their increased perceptual modification and a snake, scales wet with moonlight, was seen to pass along the edge of Ruggles fence and they gazed mutely at this and gestured stealthily to one another and Wayne's eyes went huge at the sight and Ruggles watched neighbors across the street gathered on the lawn opposite in the same aspect and they conferred as a lane in his absence and Wayne, glazed over now and almost feline in his sedate manner, passed the cigar back to Ruggles and floated backward from the glass, enveloped in the dark and pulled further still hovering through the projector's light and into darkness out of sight and Ruggles remained at the window attending to the scenery and the bumbling citizenry. He smoked calmly there at the glass, a silhouette from all sides enshrined in smoke, and he watched as the snake slid out of view beneath the neighboring fence. Ruggles brought the cone to his lips and upon inhaling Wayne's hooded head was at his side again smiling. One of the neighbors across the street pointed in the direction of Ruggles home and all glanced backward at this signal and the men were seen in silhouette there standing and at once all of these eyes looked elsewhere and the neighbors spoke furtively for a moment and dispersed weirdly without plan. Wayne laughed and turned up to Ruggles coughing, the diminishing cigar pinched between his lank brown thumb and forefinger.

You look for work since you been out?

Ruggles shook his head and stared ahead through the glass. He flicked his chin back at Wayne and the two passed through the darkness of the living room to where they had set by the fireplace and for the next three days more or less remain in this pose, with some variation, sitting and smoking. On the fourth day they had exhausted their food supply. They rousted themselves from their bleary fatigue and broke squinting into the afternoon daylight outside and lumbered along stiffly in a sort of enduring inebriation and the grass could be heard folding at their feet and the sounds it gave off were those of air and compression and the men were made weary with the daylight. They tumbled over lawns and across neighborhood lanes and both men noted that there were significantly less cars parked in the driveways there. They passed along a lane ending in a cul-de-sac and they cut through the houses there at the end of the circle and, passing between

these enshadowed houses, they came to a bank where one at a time each man ascended sidefooted a slope of mulch rimmed with cuts of limestone and quartz. Ruggles started up and the earth slid away brokenly at his feet and Wayne followed likewise and they crested the slant and tore crashing through a tangle of thorn and ivy, and they broke again in a fugitive's aspect into a plateau of grass that met the neighborhood's central thoroughfare. They stood at the road's edge looking back at the visible neighborhood with their hands over their eyes, as if they stood following the flight of an eagle, these two cannabanoidal agoraphic creatures. They turned toward the neighborhood's exit onto the highway and both men peered about in separate directions. Neither could hear a drone of motors in transit, and in this absence the toy-like sounds of birds dominated the afternoon air, squeaking woodenly through the wind. They could hear the rustle of dogwoods and the scuffing of dry leaves, pulled windward over the pavement, as they trot along through the quiet expansions of light. They passed beneath the unreliable and flickering penumbra of branches and leaf and sunlight slid honey colored and warm across their shirking skin, after days entombed in red eyed languor and shadows and thesis and counter thesis. They passed along together through sunlight and through wind and through shadow and the exit lane from the neighborhood remained in its last seen contortion curving brokenly up toward heaven and they tottered along on the sidewalk under branches of spruce and sunlit lime green needles that croseled white sunlight when you glanced at them and they came upon the highway slummocking and Ruggles and Wayne halted as if to tell the wind. The highway was empty. This was crescenting the darkness of their minds, and leisurely and baffled through this tardy epiphany they crossed the four lanes, scanning the horizon as if gleefully awaiting an onslaught of androids, and walked the shoulder on the the far side of the highway. The few simple houses plotted thereabouts, up a grassy acclivity some ways from the road itself, all had their windows boarded up. Their front doors had been reinforced from outside with slats of wood nailed across the doorframe, annd Ruggles studied this and Wayne was grinning, looking about light heartedly. He was visible today, in a pair of slim pre-torn bleached jeans that gathered wildly at his sneakers in a stack of denim string tassels and folds and above he wore a flannel mosaic shirt with a red-black paisley pattern where it was not plaid or checkerboard. He bounced along easily as if every third step alone sufficed to propel him and they crested the familiar hill to the grocery store. With the highway lain dead there at their side, they scrambled together laughing up a slope of grass like the ones who had cut it down, fleeing the scene, and they broke at length into the grocery store parking lot.

A crow sat ragged and black on the store's roof. When they stumbled onto the surface of the parking lot, the dark bird lifted strange and haltingly into the air as if sewn together crudely from tatters of black rag and it flew out hardly flapping and wound about them over the parking lot circling. From a distance of fifteen feet men could see the destruction. The accordion of sliding glass doors at the entrance had been, it seemed, driven through. The iron framework of the door was bent inward and night upward and explosions of glass greeted them on the ground. Glass so thick that it warp when viewed at its width. Glass the color of blue crystal and the color of ice. Wayne was laughing.

I told you shit was gonna pop off, didn't I?

What the fuck is going on here?

We late is what's going on here.

Ruggles shook his head at the implications of this, considering their precarious and quite vulnerable legal positions at the time and so it was Wayne first who peered through the twisted metal doorframes and padded along over the glass therein and turned smiling from the anteroom, waving Ruggles in, the firewood and gumball machines gone, and they passed into the rank penumbra of the grocery store proper and Wayne whooped out crossing this threshold giving signal or provocation to any potential other person who might be scuttling about therein and for a moment they stood listening and breathing and heard only something that sounded like the movement of claws, some invisible rustling across the linoleum hidden away in the shadowy aisles or fiendish and drooling in the darkened corner of the store, and they entered like shadows, like souls crossing through death. Sun slanted in the sparest expressions from the fenestration running along the upper walls and below these misting cuboids of alabaster, the men moved through the wreckage like hungry ghosts through the soles of their children and the store was in fragrant ruin. Gondola shelving partially dominoed. Broken glass literally everywhere, and loosed brine sour in the air at their noses and sloshing on the floor at the men's feet. Cold shadow and dark everywhere.

It seemed the selection was limited much according to darkness. Everything visible had been taken, and so they passed out of the visible toward the back aisles and corners, fumbling their hands along the further depths of the empty shelving in case something hung back out of view. They drifted wearily into pure black. Not even their teeth or eyes were visible there. And they followed the shelving with one hand drifting along for guidance and another bizarrely held at their fore like two young blind men. There in a darkness as cold and profound as the heretofore unseen and furthest leagues of the ocean, Ruggles and Wayne did find the wrapped shapes of cans and boxes of unknowable dry goods and they took these indiscriminately in their arms, as many as could be held, and they turned and held their eyes on the upper windows for navigation and they splashed along and crackled acidically trotting over rank shattered bottles of vinegar and apple sauce. They drifted back out of the darkness like men shoveling radioactive graphite and they passed into the flaxen airy light gathered at the entrance where they sorted among their finds and set items aside that neither was desperate enough to eat or carry yet. Wayne said, fuck this, and bounced off and found a cart still in the penumbra of pilfered produce section and he pushed it and took a few steps and boarded the back rail and slid along smiling and laughing toward Ruggles in the light and together these goofy degenerates dove back again into the darkness at the end of the aisles, near the back of the store, and they emerged from their blind grabbings having filled the cart to capacity with a generous amount of redundant and useless ingredients, and they took these and sorted them cursing by the entrance and returned into darkness. The store creaking in the afternoon silence and darkness. The wheels of the cart rattling and rushing daredevil through the various liquids and powders upon the linoleum. Ruggles and Wayne stood breathing and gathering speculative materials in the dark there, and again they heard the sound of paws scattering across the floor some ten yards to their left in the black. Behold their wide unseeing eyes. Uselessly open and rolling about horrified for the source of the nearing animal clatter. They drifted rightward from the noise, the cart squeaking craziliy with pivot and they ventured blind down a final corridor so enshadowed it was as if the men were walking at the bottom of a blackwater marsh. Wayne yelped at the feel of a light, tall cardboard box, and these he heaped into the cart in stacks of four or more, and so, too, Ruggles, and they

slid racing up the aisle out of the darkness, tingling at the back, and they swung ridiculously into the light. The cereal boxes came into view and they bore all the wrong labels. Wayne mumbled to himself, nigga, what the fuck is this shit, as he sorted through these undesirable fibers and brans. Ruggles was crouched at the floor, sorting through cans of olives and heavy glass bottles of pasta sauce. He stood back in the light and studied their take. It was poor. Wayne shifted his position and spat in the anteroom. Ruggles understood. This was no longer a grocery store. It was something else. Just a place of darkness and broken glass and useless filth. Even the ice machine itself had been spirited away. Wayne and Ruggles stood over the cart shooting their arms into it and plucking at items wordlessly like higglers. They dispatched everything undesirable out of it onto the floor, and there was much agreement among them on which items constituted these dispensables. They packed the cart again with items from the floor. Oats and honey. Powdered milk and cans of lentils. A few boxes of flaked corn and bran. A few jars of dill pickles. Ruggles girded the cart at the back and heaved and pushed it crackling and heavily over the glass, a sound of crystal rain, and they passed out of the grocery store's twisted anteroom into pink sunlight and warmth. Ruggles looked to Wayne.

You think every store is like this?

O, for sure, my nigga. This shit regular after an earthquake.

Ruggles shook his head.

Told you shit would pop off, didn't I?

Yes.

Ruggles leaned and spat and looked off down the deserted highway from the parking lot. A look Wayne had not seen upon his face.

What's wrong, Ruggles?

How am I going to refill my medicine?

What choo need? Wayne asked quickly, padding his pockets as if it might there might be several applicable prescriptions upon his person.

I don't know. A few things. Let's get this shit back to the house.

Ruggles told Wayne he would push the cart and they set out across the light, air fragrant with honeysuckle and onion grass, and the sun was in perfect circumference with a garland of clouds about the perimeter basking in a cantelope and butter light. There was a hoarse squawk and ragged flapping and both men looked to the sky and the crow wheeled above them there again and took up its perch again on the store. It flew as if following the circumferent limits of a leash of invisible string tied to the center of the parking lot. The crow glode over them as if cobbled from a witch's hat and it set again on the roof the store and yawped weirdly again once set there and Ruggles looked back at the solitary creature presiding over the ruins. Waiting to enter when they went out of sight. From the crest of the hill they could see on the skyline a line of cars horizontal and stacked at the furthest point of the eastern horizon. Clamor and horns could be heard and the cars moved in fits and jerks. The sun made bleary these images and the men covered their brows to shade their eyes and worked along the side of the highway, occasionally veering off and walking the cart freely across and down the road of highway itself, undisturbed over the occasionally bulbous or collapsed pavement. And in the valley below there lay a small bridge in the road over a small creek and a cathedral of trees crowded the eastern side of the highway along a thin stream of water there and the roots drunk therefrom in the faucet sounds of

birds and the sun was an alabastrine orange and it needled past them through the trees and four dark eyes floated scrunched and haltingly down the open roadway behind the cart. A cat with wet looking and begrimed orange fur leapt out of the bright green kudzu at the treeline beside the sidewalk and the cat mewed at them and began rolling crazily upon the ground, expanding her spine to full length against the grass and convulsing and fleas could be seen leaping from the fire colored fur and whirling and falling in the light. Ruggles guided the rattling cart as it gained momentum through the afternoon tumbling down the highway. Aphids and stoneflies tugged this way and that through the mustard colored light, and the cart bumped along over the median strip and Ruggles hopped astraddle the back and rolled along downward, Wayne skipping alongside. Wind building at their faces and the smell of some unknowable burnt synthetic therein and they curved together nearly toppling into the neighborhood. Ruggles let a foot down and skid to the stop and he tilted and angled the cart variously until he had it arranged upon the neighborhood sidewalk and the pair passed flickering into and out of existence under the boughed eyes of cypress and beech and the clamor of the traffic could be heard to fade at their adjustment and they pushed the cart together directly along the sidewalk and no car entered nor did any car leave and they rattled along goodnaturedlybthrough the chirp and twitter of mockingbirds and cardinals. With the cart, Ruggles and Wayne were forced to take the main passages and, following along the sidewalk, because of this they saw for the first time now the fronts of houses that they had heretofore cut behind facelessly without regard. The houses were boarded up in much the same way as those along the highway. They stopped with the cart in front of one of these homes. Ruggles looked to Wayne.

What the fuck is going on?

Wayne shrugged, undisturbed. I don't know. You white niggas be tripping.

Is there a storm coming or something?

Wayne looked to the horizon and sniffed at the air like an animal at the edge of a body of water. He closed his eyes and inhaled through his nose and open them slowly and scan again, contemplative. Wayne looked back to Ruggles.

Nah, but niggas is wilding out somewhere right now.

What do you mean?

I can tell.

Tell what.

That ain't no storm coming and niggas is wilding out somewhere right now close by, like, wilding out.

How can you tell?

Nigga, I just told you.

They went swerving and tottering around the block with the rattling cart announcing their ragged and misappropriated arrival back onto Ruggle's lane and there tilted on his driveway idling was a maroon sedan, in the back passenger window of which he could see his daughter's wild blonde-brown profile. She was holding some kind of stuffed animal and bouncing it in and out of sight. Kim turned from the driver's seat and looked at Ruggles, and whoever it was beside him, and their shopping cart, and she shook her head and let herself out of the car and approached Ruggles, half-crying and yammering, hair brown and slack and flaxen. Eyes round and wide and

copper colored. Wayne nudged Ruggles at his side and Ruggles looked and Wayne gave him a little raise of the eyebrows and a wink and at once she was upon them.
We tried calling.
Hang on, I want to say, Hi, to Dolphin. Ruggles waved at her and Dolphin, looking, returned his wave and sat grinning there talking to herself and bobbing her pink and blue stuffed animal.
We're actually in a rush right now.
Why, what's going on?
Don't you have a plan?
For what? I don't understand what's going on.
She put her hands at her hips and looked about her. She looked at Wayne and he said, What's up, little mama, and she ignored him and looked back to Ruggles, hair flipping about where it hung at her shoulders. Grey sweater.
Look, I'm going to say hello to my daughter.
Ruggles swept past Kim and went to the back passenger door of the sedan and tried to pull it and it would not yield and he looked to Kim and asked her to unlock it and she shook her head, trembling weirdly, and he again asked what was going as she ascend the driveway and resume her seat at the wheel. The back passenger window roll down.
Dolphin! I love you. Where are you going?
Mom said we're going somewhere. Where Mom?
Ruggles, you don't even have your phone.
Dolphin, how do you get back from somewhere without a map or phone?
You use the stars and the sun and the moon.
Good girl.
Where are you guys going? Dolphin, do you have your Walkie?
Everyone's leaving Ruggles. She shift the car from park and shook her head and began backing down the drive, his child's small warm hands pulled away clinging from his own. He paced bandy legged alongside the car at the back window.
What the fuck? Sorry, Dolphin. Kim, I can't leave the state. I'm on probation.
That's your consequence.
Is there a storm coming or something?
Dolphin shook her head no and Kim looked at him as if he wore a clown suit for the weather and the back window began to roll up and he trotted alongside.
Dolphin. I love you.
I love you. Who's that? She pointed to Wayne as the window sealed.
Ruggles stood in the drive beside Wayne and he could not reconcile with himself any parting moment from the child. He took up the cart again and pushed it up the drive wordlessly and Wayne took up at the fore dutifully and held the back gate open and they clattered up to the sliding glass doors and arriving there, Ruggles unlocked, slid open, and did drag the entire cart itself with him backward into the home and there they stood in the sunlit kitchen and sorted and stacked goods, taking them from the cart and arranging like items in the cupboard. They finished and Ruggles took up leaning against the counter. Arms folded and chewing his lip. Wayne took up on the opposite side and posed in the selfsame manner. He flicked his chin at Ruggles.
What we finna do?

Pharmacy.
Nigga, we need to flock fore everything is gone.
Chill.
What choo think finna happen?
I don't know. The only real change for us is these groceries were free and there's no hot water.
We ain't got no more blunt wraps.
I know. We need cigarettes, too.
So then let's do it, my nigga.
Fuck. You think these places have been swept clean by now?
We finna find out.
The men slanted together out of the kitchen and floated like goblins up through the tormented stairwell and into their respective rooms in the last of the light to arrange their effects and outfits for the following day and both did change into a sweatsuit of black with black hoods and shouting between rooms it was agreed upon that bookbags or satchels would be necessary and they met there on the small carpeted landing at the top of the stairs, the father and the child dressed in similitude as if for a portrait and studying one another in the fleeting phenomenon of interlucent domestic sunlight. They cascaded down the stairs headlong, hands upon the wall and upon the rail, and they looked like gargoyles, unloosed and bounding. They gathered out of the dark miscellanea of the hallway closet two bookbags and into the late afternoon's tawny light they went sloping through the front door, these largely tuned out and indifferent felons. And they passed through the yards of the neighborhood and curved out of it and followed alongside the road and came to a point where Ruggles directed them into the greying forest through a swirling barbed thicket and padded over the leaves into the tunnelling trunk passages of the forest and they walked along together and there was a crick ahead and they scrambled together down a leaf strewn slope and forded it and they paused together on the clay and alluvial distributions of the counter side. Wayne looked about as if some poltergeist swirled about his being, his huge child eyes flicking about crazed and rolling around in some frantic search. He looked up to Ruggles.
Nigga, you ain't tell me we was hiking.
We're cutting through. The stores, the pharmacy. It's this way. Ruggles pointed down the path of the largely dry creekbed.
Nigga don't like all these trees.
Ruggles laughed. Why, what's the deal?
Niggas just don't like trees. Forest. Wood.
They stood there in tangle of light and branch, blinking and breathing. Where they stood was fragrant with clay and there was woodsmoke in the wind. Wayne looked up to Ruggles through a needling wand of sunlight.
That shit sad as fuck which yo daughter, mane. I was like, damn! This nigga baby mama cold as fuck.
It's awful.
They stood breathing for a moment longer and Ruggles said, Come on, and they set off again, sidestepping up the leaf strewn and shuffling along the counterslope Ruggles watched an annole squiggle panicked on its belly through the pitch from where leaves had sloughed away with his footing, and Wayne followed along likewise, turning to watch the little creature's flight over the

damp earth back into shadow. Ruggles then Wayne crested the creek bed and passed along further through the ricochet of light and shadow and passing along suchlike they came to a crossing of rock, where huge wedges of pale grey limestone and striated and silver flecked amphibiolite lay cut in great piles in the elongate half shadows of the trees. They clambered up and along this unshifting bonfire of rock and padding atop the apex with Wayne at his back he pointed to the treeline beyond and through the dying light they tip toed down the rocks and trotted along side by side as the sun drag leftward sinking and swirling in marigold and pink and crimson along the clouds. They broke at length from the forest into the road, Wayne shaking his dreadlocks and wiping away at his limbs and torso as if he had just emerged from some insane apiary still covered in agitate bees, and Ruggles scanned the road to its visible horizon in both directions and there were no signs of travel. There was a better path. This put them out too far up the road.

Wayne and Ruggles walked together down the center lane in a grandiloquent aspect, enshrined by the forest on both sides and so silent was it that the slightest echo of their gumsoles could be heard rebounding back to them as they passed along, and rounding a curve the gas station and pharmacy could be seen, their signage unlit and their lots empty. Bats flit crazily in the parking lot of the pharmacy and advancing toward it, Ruggles told Wayne they should check the gas station's convenient store first and they turned and slid like malevolent spirits through the dark into the grotesque and clinical light of the filling station's car port, unaccountably still glowing. So, too, the store itself. There was a golden sedan parked beside one of the pumps. The passenger door hung open weirdly there with no nearby person and all of the windows had been smashed, it seemed, inward and blue glass lain on the taupe leather seats in a jagged proliferation and Ruggles and Wayne looked at eachother studying this and shrugged and scanned the parking lot and the outer dark for a potential owner or vandal and they walked together to the door of the convenient store and stood at the threshhold looking through glass and various signage and stickers. The lights were on inside the store somehower, and it seemed to be intact entirely, though unsupervised. Wayne tried the door first, of course, and it swung open and the sensor bonged above his tarantula head and Ruggles passed in behind him, as well, and the sensor bonged again and the men stood there sheepishly waiting for some contestant or authority to appear and disturb their speculative patronage. The shelves of the gas station, though limited, were well intact with foodstuffs, as if it were open and operating. Ruggles went to the counter and slapped a small bell there and he stood leaning with his back to the counter and Wayne materialized afore him.

You think there's anyone in here? He asked Wayne.

Yeah. We up in this bitch.

Come on. Anyone else?

Nah.

Fuck it.

Ruggles went to the back of the store and Wayne followed, bouncing along as if he were some kind of living kite that Ruggles held everywhere he went. They passed through aisles of snacks and single serve hygiene items, all neatly arranged in colorful lines, to the cooler lining the back wall. They took plastic bottles of soda from the sliding door. The dying brushstrokes of a broken

refrigerator crying out them in a weak fog and, passing back to the front of the store, each man took various candy bars and plastic packets of beef jerky.
They stood at the counter shifting this way and that, scanning the parking lot and store again. It smelled of disinfectant and a burnt vacuum belt. Ruggles looked at Wayne.
I think you've got to clear this bad boy to get to our tobacco goods.
Wayne, in that very moment with bookbag and all, did bound up and slide cleanly across the counter between the till and the plastic enframed case of spindled lottery tickets and scratch off cards. Dreadlocks swinging crazily about like a jester's cap. Wayne assumed the register side and held one finger up and disappeared beneath the counter and a moment later a carton of cigarettes held by dusty black fingers arose from the floor and was placed upon the counter and the hand held up a single index finger again and it arose a moment later bearing a box of cigars, the label of which portrayed the visage of a modest and cloaked blushing woman, not unlike the Virgin Mary, gilded in gold and blue design all about, and Wayne's face arose at last grinning and likely literally insane and he pushed these wares across the white laminated counter and Ruggles took them and loaded them into his bag and a moment later Wayne bounced up and slid back across this stygian pass and both Ruggles and Wayne did, in passing out of the store, look over their shoulders and consciously but blankly take inventory of the image of the modest intact convenient store as if it some image only worth seeing for the fact that one might never look upon it again after that moment. It was dark outside now, but they passed beneath the huge flourescent lights of the carport. The gas pumps. Numbered. Glass glittering in teal and sapphire about the sedan in various grades of pummel. Dark beyond this place. They squinted there in the huge light of the carport neared the defenestrated sedan. The flourescence of the carport was like some kind of phosphorescent cuboid mist in which these glossy eyed wanderers stood stunned. From the forest at their sides, the drone of cicadas came slinging electrically and portentous, and the men moved apprehensively away out of this synthetic daffodil light and shuffled away from the pumps back into the unroofed dark and they saw to their left the blackened shapes of a family of deer feeding at the tree line, bowing and chewing variously just outside the edge of light. Their buck wandering the road regally in a heavy clatter of hooves. Wayne nudged Ruggles stunned.
That nigga's stunting on us.
What do you mean?
He's saying, nigga. This is my road now.
Give it to him.
Why you say that?
They stood watching the buck rake his horns through the air and clop about the yellow parallel lines. Ruggles sighed and looked at Wayne.
I don't know. I think human beings might be the most miserable confused creatures to ever walk the earth. A human being is a thing that is almost necessarily haunted by confusion and suffering and indecision. Give it to him. Ruggles flicked his chin at the buck and he was gone and they could see the distort and swarming shapes of the retreating deer through the forest until their dark bounding forms became one with the larger black of the forest. The receding crunch of leaves. They stood beneath a broken streetlight. The pharmacy was across the street, and Ruggles understood that so much rode on it and he was trying not to make too much of an exhibition of

this to Wayne. The parking lot was empty and the red and white sign was not lit. Lights did not appear to be on inside the store. Roiling penumbra about the entrance. Glass and iron there the very color of the moon and starlight they twinkled.

They passed like spectres across the street and drifted reeling into the moonlit parking lot, eyeing everything above and below and floating up to the doors, dark like a cape upon each man, and Wayne's eyes flickering in every direction. They did not yet see curving towards the entrance any corruscating distribution of broken glass, though both expected to, and when they reached the enshadowed entrance itself they heard a car door slam loudly across the street behind them, starting the men, and they swung around stunned. Two black-clad robbers in wide-eyed mortification. And they did see the aforementioned transvestite wilting and clacking about in heels at the door of the golden sedan. Muttering to herself and clattering cautiously through the broken glass with her arms aloft as if it had just fallen in a sheet from the port above her.

What the fuck, Wayne. That's your girl.

Wayne was grinning. That nigga got a car. And that gay nigga ain't my bitch nigga. She live at your house not mine, right?

Ruggles just shook his head and watched.

Wayne yelped out, hands at the side of his mouth, and the transvestite spun wildly, discombulated in the dayglow light like an animal caught feeding from a trash can. She could be seen squinting at their black forms from in between the gas pump and the gold sedan. The night reeled and the men drifted in her direction swaying and there was rustling in the dark woods at the right, at the fork in the road, and the sound of cicadas and katydid oscillated still in high drone and raga. They stood on the road opposite the gas station and moths flit vibratorily above them in crazed frustration against the unlit opaque plastic crown covering the bulb. She recognized them. Ruggles passed over the road with Wayne at his left and and Dracula like they hovered sideward toward her and Ruggles felt as if made of wood here, considering the cast of characters that now constituted his associates in life, and the transvestite was wearing tight leather pants and a corset, stilleto heels and stomping about the glass gesturing to them at it and lightning invisible to them, hotter than sun, struck in the forest at their backs and clove a tree crown to stump and electric blue and quavering, twisting wildly unseen among the subterreanean roots, and it swallowed this surface scene of triplicate collision in a ghastly suffocate blue wherein there was neither time nor movement and all three remained as all were captured. In poses lurching and anticipatory and helpless, and the three emerged from this warp as a group, for there was nothing else to call them there stood heads hung over the spectacular distribution of yellow blinking glass of what were the sedan's windows.

XX

The man was at work typing when his phone vibrated and it shew an alert that his cameras were being triggered. The man's body blushed with heat, and he sat stunned, as the phone vibrated continually in his hand. He stood up in his cubicle and stretched and spun to the left and right, and he sat back down at the computer and used the internet to visit a website which allowed him to watch his home surveillance cameras in real time. He was, on account of his surroundings, to watch what unraveled there in fits and starts, clicking back to a coding file every few seconds and checking over his shoulders and listening for approaching footsteps across the carpet. He saw a black of medium height and large build with a gigantic head, covered in a stocking, at his

back door, working something between the door jamb and the door. He clicked away and looked over his shoulder. It was not the police. It was not her husband. He watched again. The black was inside the house now. The man filled with a sort of giddy fear upon seeing this and he watched as this macrocephalic black man, like something conjured out of the dark and stitched together therefrom, moved swiftly and purposefully through the private passages and places of his home, appearing on every room's cameras. Upstairs now. The man clicked away. He thought of leaving in that instant. He looked over his shoulders and a plump middle aged woman, rank with perfume, shuffled by smiling meekly at the man and passing out of sight. He thought of killing her.

Behold now, watch over the man's shoulders as this cantankerous and emburdened felon is joined on screen by a second man of similar garb and manner. Behold as the man clicks wildly and goes wan as this second man choppily begins to work upon the locks to the basement. His compatriot swarming through the kitchen and its drawers like a huge buzzard or mandrill come crashing through the window in spite of itself. And there, watch, as the pale soft hand trembles on the mouse. The man's sweating palm on the back of the neck. Eyes circumspect and small and skittering. He clicked away. He stood up. He willed his master to speak and his master was silent. The man sat down and stood up again. He willed his master again beseechingly and no response did come to him. He sat down and clicked the mouse and the man with huge head was kicking with infuriating blasphemy and reckless desecration the door to the temple's anteroom. The man put his hand on the monitor of the screen and began speaking aloud quietly for a moment and he heard the creaking swivel of his neighbor's chair and he clicked away and pulled his hand from the monitor and set it shaking on the desk and he put his jacket on and stood up and sat down again and heat washed through him and rage unlimited and the woman in the neighboring cubicle looked up and met eyes with the man and nodded and smiled and he sat down at once without responding and surveyed his surroundings and he clicked back to the video feed and something within him dropped forever from the rafters of his person into the dark as he whitened seeing the subject at the door of the temple and it opening outward and the black with the giant head had a pistol brandished instantly in her face and this he could see from two cameras simulteneously, and there was the nudging wind of passerby at his back and he closed the window and spun around in his swivel chair and his neighboring colleague across the grey carpet asked if everything was okay, and the man said woodenly that his leg hurt very much and that to relay this to Diane or Mike if they asked why he left early.

And he drove home screaming with the radio off in a sort of unbelievable accumulation of rage and apoplexy, that sent him reeling into the house in a sort of indifferent crash and immediately into the basement where saw a cell phone on the floor at the bottom of the stairs and he heard his master's voice again for the first time and, reaching the foot of the steps in state of panic, he looked to his left into the largely undisturbed workshop he the subject remained, naked and bleeding and yammering to herself, standing in a corner, advancing as if to walk and mumbling again as if in negotiation with the joining walls. The snake glossing along the grey painted stone floor at her back, black and enormous and writhing with eyes yellow and indifferent and darting about. The forked tongue out fluttering pinkly at the subject as if giving an order. The man stood at the bottom of the stairs, his master's voice rising up within him with some initial words on and directives concerning these nigger desecrants, these defilers. Who had no respect for society or

work or ritual. Nor sequence. The man stood in the bulbed light of the workshop nodding and he said aloud softly that he understood, small eyes dulcorated and glossy, and then he said, of course, and as if looking through a telescope he watched the glimmering onxy reptile scramble crazily on the ground hounding the doddering naked woman. Raising up confidently and swaying unsteadily and hissing. Darting at her bleeding shaven woman legs as she gibber obliviously into the corner in lolling and laborious tones, drool falling freely from her lower lip.

XX1

Drano said he was going back for the phone and Slime said that he was crazy and Drano agreed and sighed and sipped from his double-cup of styrofoam and reclined in his garnet leather seats, white stitching like native moccasins along its joinery, and he tapped his cigarette out the window and passed it back into his right hand and his FN was on the lap of of his joggers, which were grey and stylistically spattered with paint and across the front there was hand-knit white lettering and Slime sat beside slouched in the passenger seat, a cone of cannabis in his mouth and thumbing his cash compulsively, the tip of the blunt dilating every so often lava colored, smoke heaving and rolling all about him in swirling wave formations.

Nigga, if you ash on my seat I will literally shoot your dumb ass.

Slime shifted wildly and held the blunt out the window and the cash fanned out across his lap and few bills swayed spinning the floor at his feet and they stood in the evening traffic, cars on either side. Windows like dark liquid rendering driver and passenger invisible. Dangerous. Like spectres taken to the road. The city blurred a rush of digital blue and red and alabastrine tracing streetlights, and Drano did check almost every fifteen seconds all of his mirrors for police cruisers or cars of gang members and warmth swum through his shoulders and head and he drove along smoking and at a stop light he turned to Slime and told him he's going to have to leave town, at least for a bit. Slime nodded as if he's heard this before or as if they worked a job where transfers were often and a reality colleagues learned to live with, and they drove forward through the unratified and antic city over flattened trash and the reek of it in curled in the air with their passing smoke and the coastal warmth where invisible pale waters in deliquium hung like cool wet sheets of pollen. They came to a stoplight and both men did slouch in their seat to near invisibility, holding their pistols, watching both the light and the rearview and the peripheral cars. Drano turned in these observational variations alternately to Slime doing much the same.

That nigga just gave my phone to a task force.

That nigga ain't calling no motherfucking police.

You think they ain't knock on his door after Chang's, nigga?

Dolphin shrugged and pulled deeply from the cigar. It billowed out like weightless cream and smelled of skunk and Drano checked to see if Slime was keeping the ember sufficiently out the window and he was, nodding to himself there in the dark of the car, the neon lights of store fronts flickering across his sullen and bloodshot criminal visage.

This nigga is going to say he found it in his backyard or some shit.

That nigga ain't talking to no police.

These are white niggas, Slime. That's what white niggas do.

That nigga ain't talking to no police.

Drano drove and he lifted his cup without taking his eyes from the road and he sipped from it and headlights came parallel with the passenger door blinding everything to the right and he set the cup down softly and braced his pistol and slowed the car and switch lanes, following along.
It might be worse if this weird ass nigga keeps it.
Slime coughed and tapped the blunt at the window and sparks raced. Atomized fire colored in the rippling wind drift. He said, What choo think he finna do?
Drano tossed his cigarette from the driver's side window and he rubbed his chin. Nigga, I don't know.
Slime sat up. What? You think nigga wants getback or some shit?
Listen.
What choo mean?
I mean, listen.
Okay.
Nigga, this town. It's dry as fuck. We have hit fucking everywhere, nigga, and a nigga got two felonies and there's a task force out now on a nigga career. They ain't sending niggas to fire camp for this shit anymore.
What choo wanna do?
I got a plan.
Drano drove along the night and mendicants sloshed against the side, hosts of ruined brains wandering frenetically in pursuit of some now neurologically superscribed illicit need or some mantic unknowable mission. Ladies with crooked teeth in fishnets doddering with makeup so thick and blue about the eyes as to render their surrounding features indiscriminate and their gaze frightening, and they wore small tawdry pieces of clothing and some had fat clustered in rutted bundles that spilled out at their stomachs over their skirts, and they wander daintily and solicitous along the darkened streets and Drano watches and shakes his head and drives along and the streetlights spill across his vision and pulse and connect, and the air rips in through the cracked window and the breeze is fragrant with trash and seaweed and Drano took the cup again from its holsters and sipped from it while glancing into the rearview and his face changed almost imperceptibly and gently he conveyed the cup back into the mahogany groove of the center console and he flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror again.
Nigga, I think these task force niggas is on me right now. Put that shit out.
Slime shook to action immediately, spitting on his forefinger and hissing out the blunt and pulling as if to put on his seatbelt which he was already wearing securely. He looked to Drano, eyes filled with dread.
The fuck is you talking about.
This van, nigga. This white van. I think it's been following me.
Slime shifted upright as if good posture might relieve all suspicion and he began to swivel his head.
Don't turn around and look, nigga, what the fuck. Dumbass nigga.
Drano switched lanes and watched the rearview and a moment later the white van was behind him again and Slime was watching fully now from his rearview and both men were silent within and without and they passed along through the ruined city, whirring all about them like some kind of pathetic ending where the human accumulate was naught but useless wares and destroyed

minds and jail cells and police and hostility and Slime looked entreatingly to Drano, whose eyes were locked on the rearview, and they passed along in their frozen condition, the white van a short distance back and the driver hidden behind the windscreen. The men pushed their guns down beneath their seats without moving the top halfs of their persons and Drano carried on driving, signalling conscientiously and even driving courteously, and trash flipped up from the road at his passage and spun and fell flat again, rank and flattened and blackening, and the moon was full above in the sky and he slowed the vehicle and pulled off onto a service road and took a right at a stop sign at the end of a roadway crowded with darkened and arcane businesses save a well lit liquor store around which men gathered drinking from bottles and large cans with paperbags on them, and Drano checked the rearview and the van was still behind him and he said to Slime that they, or this van, or whatever was in it was following them for sure and Slime sat in blank fear, city lights colorful and variously replicated on the translucent outer layer of his eyes. Drano kept rubbing his chin and shifting in his seat, furtively sipping from his styrofoam cup, ice clinking quietly, and he wanted a cigarette but was now apprehensive, as if it might draw enough attention for the van to pull them over and swarm them and he drove along the residential streets, the houses identical and brown and pale lit in the moonlight, and the van was still behind him as they neared his auntie's house, and Drano was wondering if he should take the gun in or leave it in the car and he elected in his mind to leave it in his car, for if they were sprung upon the lawn he could avoid that charge perhaps, and they followed the darkened roadways where tropicalia grew in unreliable fits from lawns and near stop signs. Yellow squares washed in intervals in a sort of grid upward along the windscreen and Drano watched them and drove along, and they came upon his aunt's house and he pulled up to the sidewalk, the van still at their back, and both men did in their respectively slowed perceptions exit the car and walk the length of the lawn to the door as if across a wire, and the white van slowed considerably and watched at their backs, and though both men did have every impulse to, neither did turn their head to look back, though the van now idled unnaturally in the background, and this presence they felt like a thousand clutching hands at their backs. Waiting for the sound of several doors opening and shutting. Officialized language shouted from the hind. Swirling lights.

Drano's hand was shaking with the key at the door when they heard the van accelerate again and slide off into the night at their blushing backs. They stood listening at the threshhold until this sound sent from the van's exhaust was lost in a wash of sound, and they stood breathing and stunned there, uncertain of their very lives themselves. Drenched in the pumpkin colored light of a wall fixture at the front door. And they returned to the car still numb and scanning and retrieved their arms wearily and passed back over the lawn and into the house like assassins and Drano's aunt was watching television and she turned around and looked at them entering and turned back to the television and took up the remote and adjusted the volume, and they passed behind her as if filled with freezing starlight and were led forthwith into Drano's room. Slime fell across the cluttered room in an aspect of approaching ramification, and he sat on the bed and put his head in his brown hands and Drano paced in circles the floor of the small room, sipping from his cup nervously and kicking the trash about the floor arbitrarily. He looked to Slime on the bed.

Alright, nigga, we're leaving.

The fuck is you talking about?

I'm leaving. I'm out. Like tonight.

Where the fuck you going to go?

I'm going to flock across the fucking country. To the East Coast. You can stay here and get arrested, nigga.

And somedays later Slime was indeed arrested on burglary charges. Tonto the following day, both in relation to the Chang residence. It was Waffle who Drano picked up and left with that night. Drano had taken his garments and piled them with a sense of urgency into two black trash bags and these he conveyed to his vehicle, his auntie glancing back from the sofa and asking nothing. The television conveying indistinct conversation across the living room that sounded like a made up language of emotive tones alone. Back in the bedroom, Drano consolidated all of his cash. Nigh twenty-five thousand dollars totaled. He stood in his bedroom sometime later that evening, trying to conjure a clear path forward from all of this darkness. Slime having left.

He stood there at a loss and he thought of the holes he had seen in the woman's forehead and he wondered whether or not she was still alive, and he stood blinking down at the obsolete parakeet green carpet and the colorful leather ends of his sneakers. He studied the room and he was conscious in doing so that he may not ever return, because he was never going back into that other room. And if that meant driving across the country, and staying there, then that's what he was going to do, because he was never going back into a cell again. He thought of the woman in the room again. He thanked God that he had not shot her. For it was true, he had come as close to pulling the trigger upon contact as one could without actually compressing the lever mechanism of the triggeritself. The ceiling fan whooped slowly overhead and he could hear faint from the bedroom window sounds from the streets beyond and a low chorus of crickets and he walked to the window and pulled the ivory colored cord and the shade whooshed upward into a perfect spun bundle and the alley lights were huge white sparks afore the gate in the dark, and he saw two black thatches of figures pass by without taking notice of him and he pulled the shade again like some huge divining scroll down over the window before him and he padded his pockets for his effects and set out, uncertain of all but a few things ahead of him.

Drano had bought a burner the day before and he called his plug and told him that he needed to come in person and he would not tell the man over the phone the amount he was prepared to spend upon arrival for it would almost certainly circulate through the city in a matter of minutes that he was traveling by himself with twenty-five thousand dollars and though armed, this was not a situation he thought appropriate to navigate at this time and he arrived at his dealer's aparment, and the man buzzed him up and met him at the door. A look of concern on both of their faces. The dealer was a black man named Ahab, and he had skin so deep black that it was the color of dark chocolate and his eyes were tired and kind and large and he kept his hand on a pistol in the pocket of his robe throughout the entire transaction as was standard for him and Drano took no offense. Ahab sold codeine syrup and percocet. And Teslas. MDMA tablets. He waved Drano in without a real word between them and he turned and passed into the expansive and pristine white of the condo. They passed a living room and the television was playing a sitcom with white people and a laugh track. Drano followed Ahab over the polished tile floors and the plush rugs and drawing near the kitchen a grey pit bull stood at full attention growling and trembling in front of Drano in the corridor, and when he went to step again, it moved, as well, as if to match his paces. Skittering on the circular white tile and shifting a rug that looked the fur of an artic wolf. Drano stood staring at the dog bored, as if stuck in traffic. The first

thought that came to his mind was to shoot it. Ahab had to switchback and come around behind this argent canine monstrosity and hold it by the thick of the leather collar as it stood scrambling and clittering on its hinds for some purchase of Drano as he sidestepped by, eyeing the dumb thing with human hate, and passed out of sight into the ivory garden of the kitchen.

The apartment itself smelled of cannabis, raw and smoked, and it smelled of candles burning a scent of juniper and another of vanilla and these he saw lit and trembling on the island. Copper cookware well cared for above the island gathering light and slithering golden and bronze about their curvature and handles. Drano slouched across the room to a circular glass dining table and he set down his leather knapsack and took up his seat there, gazing out of habit absently at the throw rug made from the hide and taxidermied head of a grizzly bear that ran head first toward the table from the far side of the island. He studied the bear's teeth. Pearlescent. He was sweating. He had stared at this before. Everytime, in fact. He caught himself breathing too fast and he put his hand on the cool glass table for something like grounding. He looked about the room. Eyes huge. The kitchen was clean in the most absolute sense and when Ahab strode in a moment later he swung a small gate closed at the threshhold and he latched it and the pitbull stood behind it quaking and whining and growling, watching Drano. He thought of shooting it again. Ahab lumbered over in his slippers and blue robe and he sat across from Drano at the glass dining room table and fixed his eyes on this loyal and perspiring customer. His face was serious.

Don't tell me some shit about the police, nigga. I don't want to hear it.

That's not what it is, Drano said.

Then what the fuck you saying. We need to talk in person type shit.

Drano reached down into his bag and his hand came out after a moment clutching approximately twenty-thousand dollars. He placed it on the table and held his hand over it to keep the bills from jumping with their various creases. He looked up at Ahab.

Nigga, I'm trying to buy everything you got.

Ahab looked at him. What the fuck is this, Drano.

Everything you got.

You get popped or some shit, nigga, and you bringing your problems here to me? Do you understand what I'm saying. Ahab was trembling.

Drano understood now that Ahab thought he was being set up. That Drano had been arrested on felony possession and had cooperated to avoid his third strike. Drano stood from the table sweating in the wild light of the chandelier and he shook free of his pink and seafoam corduroy bomber jacket and held it up to Ahab and dropped it on the floor beside the bookbag. He then pulled his tee shirt up over his head and there he stood naked above the waist, tattooed crudely across the whole of his brown torso, posed in loyalty in the white elongations of kitchen light in his well stitched jeans that bore the face of Medusa in navy blue stitched across their length, and Ahab's face relaxed from its trembling and Drano sat back down shirtless at the table and let his arm rest there on the tablet, hand settling again over the fanning display of bills.

Okay, Ahab said.

Nigga, you think I'm a rat, nigga?

You got two strikes, nigga.

That doesn't matter, nigga. What, you think it's two options? Cooperate or it's just a done deal? If I get booked? Come on, nigga.

I've seen real niggas fold, Ahab said, and a look came over his large features as if in that moment the faces of these men hung in melancholy portrait in his mind's eye. He gestured to the wad of bills splayed on the table in magnificent blue green display.
How much is that, like fifteen bands?
It's twenty, nigga.
I ain't got that much.
Nigga, don't play.
I ain't playing, nigga.
How much you got?
Nigga, you ain't my only customer.
Nigga, you sell something. I'm buying it.
Ahab leaned back and he stretched and his arms were long and broad at the wrist and he brought his hands back to the table and drummed lightly upon the glass with his huge brown fingers.
Nigga, what kind of shit are you into?
What you mean?
Why are you sitting at my house with probably, nigga, all your cash trying to buy a nigga business out?
Drano shift in his chair shirtless, his belly swollen and folded once above the visible band of his undergarments. His tattoos were as varied in their selection as they were in their quality. Hours, days he had spent in the shadowy bunk of the county jail in half-satiate boredom, paying a man to decorate him so permanently with a smuggled tattoo gun and paying large sums of money for the execution thereof. Children's cartoon characters orbited across his violent body framed with rudimentary buddhas and hundred dollar bills in careless sway and clouds and poisonous black smoke below his shoulders and his name in enormous unmeasured hollow block letters across the whole of his belly. There was a quarter sized and shaped pale spot of flesh on his abdomen from where he had been shot once while driving in a car with Waffle. He sat up and put his elbows on the table, facing Ahab squarely.
Nigga, I'm leaving.
The fuck you mean, you're leaving.
I'm leaving, nigga. Task force shit. Burglary squad or some weird shit.
They on you?
I had undercovers on me today. This shit's about to happen.
You sure you ain't tripping nigga?
Nigga, I'm sure.
Ahab put his hands to his eyes and he rubbed them and sighed and folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. He regarded Drano. He knew he was in acute need right now. Sweat upon his brow like a hundred restless jewels in the light of the chandelier. The akathisic shifting of his legs. The lost eyes, flickering away and downward.
How did you fuck up?
Nigga I ain't do shit.
How you fuck up, Drano?
Drano's eyes flicked downward and he studied the front and back of his hands. Allegedly like, dropped a phone at a flock or some weird shit, he admitted sheepishly.

You dumbass nigga. That's got my fucking name in it.
I clear that shit everytime I drive nigga and your name is Veronica Violet.
Ahab sighed. You coming back?
Does that change what I'm trying to do here?
Maybe, nigga.
Nigga, I'm going to the opposite side of the country. This isn't some two weeks in a red roof in fucking Nevada or some gay shit. I'm never hitting the county again, on God, nigga.
Ahab studied him across the table. He was looking away. This was typical for Drano. He had spent too much time in isolation while incarcerated and Ahab knew this. Everyone knew this now. And he watched as Drano's eyes swung up from the floor and met his, brimming with sincerity and suppressed urgency. Ahab put his hands over the bills and pulled them smoothly to his side of the tempered glass table.
Aiight, nigga. I got that much.
Drano's person went cool at once with relief in a sense that he felt slow and sedate and he watched through this to be dulcorated reverie as the dark black man, baldheaded and huge eyed, lumbered up from the table and sidled lazily out of the kitchen, sharkfaced pitbull still whining at the gate, and Drano stood up and slid his shirt over his form and then his jacket and he sat back down and regarded the bear throw again and the polished flecking of the marble island and how the cookery hung gold and glinting, burnished with oil, from the silver racks that spawned a replicate penumbra on the island below and all of these colors and neatness and the windows and all was white as snow and Drano looked to the window and so liquid and blackgreen was the night thereupon that it seemed the pure white condominium exist perhaps under the ocean and the slightest orange glow could he see beyond from some building top and he looked back to the circular table. The money lay in a fan of confusion like a bundle of playbills nearest to where Ahab had set and there was to the left on the table a wooden bowl of oranges and kiwi and mango and Drano did touch these with his hands, believing them fake, and at that very moment Ahab returned to the room and Drano flushed wonderful sparks at the neck and he watched as the enrobed man shuffled lazily in his slippers across the kitchen, a heavy grocery bag in his hand. Ahab set it wordless and clunking on the table before Drano. Drano looked up at him and noticed for the first time that the man was now cradling a small bald cat in his free hand, holding it close to his breast and resting it in the nook of his left arm. Ahab flicked his chin at the bag.
That's twenty.
Drano parted the frayed wings of the plastic bag and into this ark he conveyed his vision and his hands and sorting through found ten sealed pints of codeine syrup and some three hundred small blue tablets of percocet. He looked up at Ahab and the cat.
I thought you ain't have that much, nigga.
I ain't know you wasn't coming back.
I know, Drano said.
He reached into the plastic bag and took from it one of the orange prescription bottles and he asked Ahab if he could have a glass of water and Ahab nodded disappointedly, sitting again at the table petting his cat, and Drano stood from his chair and drifted as if pulled to the cupboard where he extracted a glass and closed the wooden door with a slight knock and filled the glass at

the sink and swallowed three pills from the bottle and set the glass in the sink and walked back to the table and sat down. Ahab was shaking his head, smirking.
You bad, nigga.
What the fuck you talking about?
You bad, nigga. You a junkie.
O, nigga, and you don't drink a pint a day? Shut your bitch ass mouth.
Yeah. But you bad, nigga.
Yeah, well, nigga, I'm worse without.
Ahab shook his head and he manipulated the wrinkled folds of skin about the cat's head and it mewed and Drano knotted the plastic handles of the white grocery bag and pulled the knot tight down to the contents and conveyed this with pint bottles upright into his bookbag. Ahab stood first, cat in the nook of his left arm rowing her legs and mewing weirdly and baldly, and Drano followed, swinging the bookbag up around his shoulders. Ahab opened the gate and held up a finger and with his free hand he once again stood astraddle the crazed pitbull as it growl, as if out of some grudge personal to Dran, and he sidestepped by again and he watched as it pulled back, forgetting him, and twisted wildly on its hind legs, snapping viciously and growling at the cat, and Ahab released the collar and kicked the dog in its broad grey side and it slid across the white tile on its side and stood to cowering moaning and whining. Drano passed on with a feeling of personal satisfaction and Ahab was still talking at his back as, levitating, he passed out of the doors and through the pristine opalescent hallways and cream colored elevators with polished buttons, and he descended to the ground floor and passed through the lacquered wood and polished granite flooring of the orange lit lobby. Security guards in blue matching uniforms behind a desk noting him and he looking away all the while and, passing through a set of revolving doors, he is borne as if by a current through dark and the lamplit sidewalk and the oblong butterscotch shapes thrown by these lights upon the clay covered brick of the building wall and with the bats he float up through the sky, sparkling all about him and churning as if from within, as well, and the stars cold and pale he conceives of as literal ghosts, as indisputable evidence of the existence of representation subsequent death. And his car is suddenly beside him and at once he reached for his cigarettes and sits in the slanted parking garage, the bookbag placed in the trunk, and smoked a full cigarette with his head against the scarlet leather headrest. Eyes closed and the car idling. The burner buzzed to sudden life in his pocket and he flipped it open and Waffle was on the line. He had spoken to Slime and taken the facts differently and asked if he could accompany Drano as he abscond, for Waffle had two strikes, as well, and had heard earler that very day that two men had come to his mother's house looking to speak to him.
Where you at now?
I'm at my grandmama house.
You got your clothes there, nigga?
Yeah, but we gotta go by my mama house so I can grab some more.
Nah, nigga, we ain't going by your mama house.
Drano, a nigga need to get some clothes.
A nigga need to not roll up to some weird ass task force trap neither. Come on, nigga, you got clothes. I been in your grandmama house you got a pile of shit in there.

Drano closed his eyes again and then the notion to turn on the car's massage seat option arose in his mind and he leaned forward and operated a touchpad until the red leather seat he sat upon started to life with vibrations and a rolling bar that moved as if rolling dough out against his spine and curling around knuckling along up both sides of it. The light of the parking garage was spare and the color of piss. He opened his eyes and Waffle was talking to himself as he took inventory of his available clothes and ideally was packing these now and Drano saw two rats tumble downward along the black stained parking garage wall, following a phosphorescent green putrescence that accumulated down along the corner of the wall until out of view and he did see a band of pigeons, silver and blue green, red breasted and chittering frantically on the ledge of the city sky. Drano some three levels above the street in the garage. Urgency overcame him.
Nigga, put your clothes in a bag and I'll be outside your crib in fifteen minutes.
Give me twenty, nigga.
Drano sighed.
Twenty, starting now.
The phone clicked and it beeped twice in Drano's ear. He clasped it closed like a mysterious oyster and returned it to his pocket and he considered getting a pint bottle from the trunk but did not and he lit another cigarette and the menthol smoke passed through him cold and anasthetically and camphorated and he could not see what lay ahead of him for it was murky in every direction and within. But it was certain darkness here and he could see this lowering upon him like some disgusting crumpled black curtain on him and his felonious ventures. He was never going back to that room. He thought of how the Eastern wall had tilted halfway through and he had to stand diagonally inside of the shadows there and knew he should keep it to himself and he thought further and understood that if it had to end in being shot instead of ever going back, that being shot was preferable without debate or question. The latest stay had bent something inside of him. He did not understand if this made him weak, but the others had never been down there in isolation with fast-talkers and career killers and the four by six cell with unpainted stone walls that looked without exaggeration medieval. And for two years. He felt his heart race and the room he could feel as if it floated about him now waiting for a weakened moment to reform about him and a general ill at ease whirred through him, as if the blood in his veins carried through the silent passage of his veins some nerve poison. The seat was vibrating and that overwhelmed him unexpectedly and he punched it to off through the touch screen and he looked to the left and there hovering before the pigeons did he see like a living opal in suspension the mother of the living God smiling and feeding the pigeons, and a light of powder blue pulsed about her and she was encased in light as if an invisible crystal was her spirit and he blinked and she was gone and he said, What the fuck, to himself in a very quiet voice and exited the car with minimal force, as if a rare bird might be startled and he walked the slanted and stained slate pavement to the rise toward the ledge where the pigeons fed, and he came upon them and they shuffled skipping and chittering along the ledge away from him, following the stone coping to the left, and he stood at the parking garage's third level ledge to the sky and looked out crazily through the night, down at the headlights stacked in transit and stopped, beeping and carrying along, crowns of heads below in pairs and singly passing along oblivious to their observation.

The parking garage held wind warmly about him searching. She was not there. He sloped down the lot, following vaguely along the yellow guidance lines and, looking out of the ventilated stone level all about him for some subsequent sign, he came back to his car unmet by visions more. He sat in the seat and shook his head and said to himself that he was tripping, and he thought of how the snake had moved at the woman's feet as if in ownership of her and unafraid of her and he thought of the room he had been in and he thought of going back and understood that he could not and he wondered why there were holes drilled into her head and how it would be better if the man killed her than for the woman to be kept there in that museum of death, the snake lashing about her. He thanked God again in his mind that he had not pulled the trigger. He thought of how the FN would have kicked lightly in his grip and how the 5.7mm shell would have torn open her head in a sort of blossom of torn face and blood and brain and how she would dropped inanimate and slack and instantaneously to the floor. He exited the vehicle and went around to the trunk and unzipped the patterned leather knapsack and untied the plastic bag therein and he brought a sealed pint bottle of codeine syrup with him to the front seat and conveyed it into the passenger dash. He removed the key from ignition and locked the dashboard manually and returned the key to the ignition and the car ruffled awake near silently once more and he reversed out of the spot and his headlights did catch the panicked eyes of rats, suddenly seen bright lit and gatheredm, feasting on some unidentifiable pink anneloidal mass, and their eyes were shocked and green-red and he shuddered and spun the hand stitched wheel and tilted up the slanted drive following the yellow arrows to the exit path and he sloped curving down and around the ramp and he thought of his son, who he was leaving for now, how he was not sure if he would grow up likewise. How his mother kept him from the boy whom he loved with all of his calloused heart. Why the world would breed us for such lives, where everything is at risk and for nothing sacred.

The night was like a dark liquid through which he moved as if in avoidance of sharks, driving meekly with the radio off and steadily watching his mirrors and letting the opioid warmth washing through him propel him forward through the sad lights of the city streets and all their haggard wanderers. Was he one of them. He thought of being pulled over before leaving the city, the bag of juice and pills in the back, and he reckoned he would flee while sipping the one in the dash and then he remembered that he could not open the dash without stopping the car and he thought of the cell and the trickle of water from the dorm above it that ran sporadically throughout time there. He thought of watching it, and he saw an image in his mind of being shot in the dark roadway in the psychedelic extension of red light from a police cruiser, and he took a right and followed along a lane of lane of single-story houses with monkey flower and milkweed growing from the lawn and bearding the window. California poppy like fleshy static flames with cool green spikes. He came to a house and pulled beside the curb after the mailbox and he saw the blinds part in the room to the right of the front door and a moment later Waffle was laboring across the lawn with a white trash bag filled with clothes and a firearm and a box of ammunition and all of his cash and approximately four ounces of cannabis. Drano rolled down the passenger window. The sounds of the night met him.

In the trunk. I'm a pop it.

Waffle nodded and swung around the back of the car and Drano heard the trunk thump shut and Waffle got in and said that this was crazy and Drano drove away at once, though measuredly,

following along and checking everywhere. Expecting to be caught now. Willing himself to want to be shot. That it would ultimately be better. Waffle shifted in the passenger seat. He was wearing red jeans that bunched at the bottom and tassles flaired all down the legs like the continuously mended trousers of a sherpa and he wore a jacket of denim with ornate hand stitched embroidery of a green dragon in curling dominance and cloven across the front, Japanese characters stitched along the sleeve. Streetlights of sodium vapor slid by on both sides and replicated in the windscreen, dragging upward out of sight and appearing at the bottom and dragging upward out of sight again. The men watched blankly as they drove, the stakes understood to both of them until reaching the highway east. Both of their bodies did feel numb and sedate, and fear sat sickly in them, but blankly, as if within a box not yet opened. Drano was more sedate than Waffle, thanatonic and the tablets metabolizing in a wisping distribution in his overburdened liver, and all was elastic before him, the rags of death so nearby and so real, and he had lived all of his life, he realized in that moment, in such a manner that it was not closing in now on him yet so much as making him aware of its fearsome nature and menacing him with it, and he resolved that there was no discussion to be had with fear for he was not going into a cell again, or anything that could lead to that room, and so it just warmed above him. He thought of the image of the glowing Virgin and he knew not if he saw her or some lovely white woman ghost or a void hallucination of a mind coming unhinged from the potentials before it and they passed near silent, hovering almost, onto the interstate and slid along blankly. The huge aluminum signage flitting by above them greenly and lights washed into and out of, and it was not until they were nearly ten miles out that the men took up speaking. The interstate hummed at their sides. Drano lit a cigarette. Waffle looked over at him.

Where we finna stay.

We finna drive til I can’t and then get a hotel.

Aiight.

Waffle slumped in his seat and he pulled from his pocket a plastic packet of cannabis and he held this on his lap and he took a cigar wrap from the same pocket and he broke the green flower up like moss, lining it along the leaf wrap and spinning it into a snug cylinder, licking it at length and pressing his fingers along the leaf’s border. He asked Drano for the lighter.

Wait til we’re a bit further out.

For real, nigga?

For real.

The roadway was near black now and he watched the anonymous paired lights at his fore and at his back and, eyes flickering between these, any one of them could be a police cruiser and he thought again of the room and then of being shot on the side of this very road and he was resigned to it, though he wasn’t sure how this would fare for Waffle in the event he wished to keep his life. He could stay in the car. Cooperate. Blame him for everything and avoid his third strike. Drano drove along and his headlights swung pale out before them like angels of God swimming through invisible liquid at their fore with swords mighty and made of moonlight and he saw within him the image his son tumbling into the living room at two years old with a full carrot in his mouth and one in each hand. Roots and all. A sensation of spinning in the pit of his stomach. Little boy with my forehead and mischievous eyes. He rolled the windows down and Waffle looked up as if this might indicate some kind of end of their moratorium, whether

desirable or not is uncertain, and the warm air curved in and baptized them there with the invisible particulate material of the highway and pollen, and each man unaware of the other did breathe in deeply and they were further along now, out of the main prosecutorial region, and the cars were few on the highway with them now and Drano followed the interstate through the onyx and sparking midnight air electric and endlessly racing up to them and away in exhale and current and wind. Waffle had dyed his hair neon green from bleached the day before and he smacked at an itch on his scalp, and Drano considered getting pulled over with a passenger with green hair. Another felon, but with green hair. He shook his head and Waffle looked over at him and gestured at him to close the windows. The glass rose bilaterally a moment later and the men were again encased largely in their sounds alone.

The fuck we going to do for dough? Waffle asked.

How much you bring?

I still got like six bands from that Chang nigga.

I got five.

So what the fuck we gon do.

We gon get a phone book in every town we stop in and go to work, nigga.

You think there's Chinese niggas in every state?

Yes, you dumbass nigga.

Waffle looked out at the window, at the curved metallurgy of the guardrail, fletched with reflectors, and he gazed at the rushing tatter of grass and weeds and trees beyond. He looked back to Drano.

How we going to do this shit with just us? It takes two trips when there's a safe. Nigga, you know this.

Listen. We're gonna use walkie talkies, nigga.

We still gotta do two trips.

Well, nigga, if the second trip gets hot we talk on the walkie talkies and book.

They drove in silence for a moment and Drano looked over at Waffle's expressionless face.

Nigga, he said. You ain't need to a do a second trip every time it's a two man flock.

Waffle shrugged and asked if he could light his blunt. Drano said that he could and that if he burnt the seat he was going to risk everything shooting him, and Waffle told him to relax and spoke from clustering fog of smoke like some kind of warlock, bowed over in his seat in the tattered sweet reeking cloud, his eyes lost in amneotic meditation and criminal resignation, and they drove this way for some time. Hours. The sky blue black and tortured and clouds like great ragged black petals of a flower scattered rent across the panorama and it was past midnight and the moon was full and watery at their right, hung up as if by invisible strings that knotted in the endless blackberry colored heavens. The teeth of Ursa Major glinted above their chute down the eastward highway and need was building again within Drano and he told Waffle he was getting off at the next exit and he switched lanes in the custard colored moonlight and passed along and sloped down the exit, taking a right on a service road and following along and pulling into a well-lit gas station with a twenty-four hour convenience store attached. Drano slid the car parallel with the first pump and he exited the vehicle and strode across the lot into the store. Bells rung overhead at his entrance and a Pakistani man wearing a poorly-fitting red collared shirt with the filling station's insignia on the breast pocket nodded uncertainly to him. Drano

returned the man's subtle greeting and he went along the aisles to the cooler in the back. He slid the door aside and a soft roar of cold fog met him and he removed two peach-flavored teas in glass bottles and closed the door. The light was pale and yellow in the store. He sidestepped to the next segmented glass refrigerator door and opened it against the suction and fetched a pair of peach sodas in plastic bottles and he trot heavily up the aisle to the counter. The bell above the door chimed again digitally and Drano turned at the register and saw Waffle shuffling back to the cooler, rank with cannabis smoke. FM radio was playing grainily on the store's speakers. The attendant studied Drano as he set the bottles on the counter. Drano felt his eyes upon him. Without looking up to meet the man's eyes, he spoke, arranging bottles arbitrarily on the counter between them.

I'm a need sixty on pump three, too.

Sixty. On. Pump. Three. Okey dokey.

Pack of menthols.

The man turned around and fetched a green and white package of cigarettes and these he slid across the counter to Drano, who conveyed them into his front right pocket. The man gestured at the beverages.

Do you need bag?

Yeah.

The attendant lifted each bottle of colorful liquid and set it inside a plastic bag the color of burnt umber. Drano pulled a veritable brick of bills from the corduroy of his jacket and he peeled from the stack a single one-hundred dollar bill and the Pakistani man took it and held it up to the light and then set it down on the counter and fetched a pen that did not write and this he ran across the bill. He held it again to the light and opened the register and placed it beneath the removable blac plastic slotted drawers of the till and he plucked therefrom three smaller bills and some change, and Drano took this money and consolidated the paper portion into the spiral fold of bills in his pocket, and the change he tossed in the bag with the drinks as he would have any trash on hand in that moment.

The man started jabbering in incoherent tones at his back at the door and upon turning around he noticed the attendant was speaking into a earpieced mobile phone. Waffle looked at Drano boredly and back to the attendant. Bells chimed passing out of the store and into a median lake of alabaster light he moved, as if upon skates across the tan stone surface of the filling station. The trill of bush crickets and trigs came invisible and trilling from a patch of trees across the service road. Drano took the nozzle from the pump's rack and he set it carefully inside of the grooved steel conduit on the side of his car and he pulled the huge trigger with the whole of his right fingers and the rushing honey colored oil could be felt rumbling through the black rubber tubing and the metallic nozzle and it could be smelt sourly and vaguely as it tunnelled down in the bowels of the vehicle. He clamped the handle with the counter-lever and it ticked lightly into place and he went to the passenger door and unlocked the dashboard and tossed the bottle of codeine syrup across the center console onto the driver's seat. Loons could be heard far off hoarsely calling out for something.

Drano made his way around to the front of the car lumbering and stiff. He threw the driver's door open and fetched the heavy brown plastic bottle and set it in the center console. He lifted the bag of beverages clanking up into the car from where he had sat them beside the tire. Waffle was

slumbering out of the convenience store now, dead-headed, walking toward the car and looking in no discernable direction, as if he was a man who had lived all of his life without looking once upward to the sky. Rather, led along with head pushed down. Drano glanced at this tired figure with his mossy mane and bloodrimmed eyes and shook his head. He took the glass bottle of peach tea from the crackling plastic bag. He placed it snug between his thighs, and he knotted the plastic bag and turned and placed it behind him on the floor of the backseat. Drano could still hear the chugging gasoline shuttle into his vehicle. His door was half opened and the light slanted downward from the carport onto his leg slightly angled out, and he took the bottle of syrup from the center console and removed crackling the plastic-printed seal about the cap, and he opened the bottle and licked the empurpled bottom of the cap and sealed it again. He took the glass bottle of tea from his lap and spun the smooth metal disk at the top and it pocked when the suction broke. Drano held the bottle out of the driver's side door and tipped it and poured approximately one fifth of the ocher pink liquid on the filling station's ground. He conveyed it back to a stand between his thighs, and he took the brown pint bottle of syrup profoundly, like a human tasked with the dispensation and handling of ichor. Waffle's door opened and Drano glared at him and immediately said, no, before a word was spoke, and he kept his eyes on the widening and narrowing string of mauve syrup runneling like mucilaginous blood into the flesh colored fluid. Diving down and skeining in near black viscoid formations, as if these dark tunnelings traced the form in liquid of the roots of a single flower.

Drano tilted the syrup upright and repaired the caps to both vessels and he set them in the center console, glaring at Waffle again. Waffle shaking his head as if asking Drano for a line had not passed his mind. The pump clicked dryly at their back right, and Drano slid out of the car and sloped around the burgundy curvature and he returned the nozzle to the pump and sealed his gas tank clicking.

The attendant was standing outside, at the door of the entrance. Watching him. He was no longer talking into his headset and Drano looked up furtively at the man as he rounded the car again and he watched as the man tried to meet his eye, his dark brown neck in swift weird flexure. Black-brown eyes protuberating and searching. The attendant ventured a word.

Vare are you. Driving so late?

Drano stopped at his door. The man stood at the entrance in a posture grotesque and incomprehensible, outlined in light, frenetic and abrupt in his movements. His dark eyes and forehead oscillating about bizarrely through the soft lemony flourescence that spilt freely from the light fixture above the door and the glowing signage. The dark skinned and heavily hirsute man hovered about in these contortions. He had his arms held aloft in a sort of revelatory posture, folded forth at a sickening hooked angle like the forearms of a praying mantis. The attendant posed the question again, only louder this time, and Drano glanced over to him and said, nowhere, and he got into the driver's seat. The man jerked a bit, spastically, as if freeing himself from a huge spiderweb, and started from the washing light of the entrance towards the car, and Drano pulled his legs in all the way and closed the door. The attendant's dark face was upon him there suddenly at the window. Drano glanced over and Waffle's countenance was as alarmed as it had ever looked in his life, and he flattened himself along the passenger door and window, slinking down in his seat as if to escape the man's sight.

The attendant knocked on the window, as if this was the most natural thing in the world to do, and he leaned forward and cupped his hands over his eyes and pressed them against the tinted glass and Waffle said, What in the fuck is this nigga doing?
Tripping.
The fuck you do?
I didn't do shit. This nigga is just weird as fuck.
The man knocked on the window again and peered in again through his tunneled hands.
Sir? He said from outside the car. Sir?
Waffle rolled his eyes and sighed. Just roll down the fucking window, nigga.
Drano shook his head and rolled the window down with the man still leaning upon it and his hands squeaked against the pane and he buckled weirdly at the side, moaning histrionically, and rising again the face he wore was accusatorial and hurt. The whites of his eyes yellowed and glinting in the distorting light. Flickering around the visible car invasively. Drano looked at the man, who appeared to now be, in this final moment of contact, struck dumb.
Nigga, what the fuck is you doing?
I asked vare you are going.
Why?
Because there is more out there than highway. There is more out there than interstate and the exchange of traffic and borders and coasts and water and more coasts.
Nigga what? Drano looked at Waffle, who quite bizarrely and discordantly had a look upon his face as if in full mystical understanding of the cryptic attendant. The attendant went on.
There are idols, rather. Idols more than anything. And though so be it that idols might dominate the material world, it still may only ultimately be reduced to a sort of poorly decorated Eden where the inhabitants have done away with any sensible values and placed disgusting idolic monuments wherever they could. It is not just highway. Rather, the highway exists as if to draw certain men, and not others, along it. And not just these men, but their destinies. There is distance and there is destiny. And the amount of the former that one may put between oneself and the latter is arguable, if it indeed be extant at all. Though I admit there is perhaps a certain elongation or forestalling of that destiny's absolute materialization that might be achieved by removing oneself from a location that was expeditiously bringing about that destiny to another location not so yet teleologically oriented. But all of this commutes in caravan across the highway behind men. A man can change the form of his destiny, but never the nature of it. But the highway carries you alone to more idols. Idols more than anything.
Idols? Drano was watching the man now with some sense of relief that he was insane and not querying them for purposes associated with the enforcement of law.
Yes, yes, of course. All of this. My store. An idol. All idols. It is not a dream I found here in business. In America. Instead I found idols everywhere. Grotesque idols. And circulating between all of them, a euripus of cash that gurgled disgustingly with the breath of men who died only having labored. Cash and blood and lives funneling, I saw from above, wasted in repetitive concession and phrase and action and the earth pulled from them in death without having left an imprint of their own shape save the slop fallen from their lover's legs. Who will do much the same. But you meet me here as if stumbling upon a lighthouse and its wearied keeper. But a keeper with a word of warning. And a keeper of secrets.

Waffles was watching the man attentively with a cool expression, listening and nodding. Drano frowned up at the attendant from his half-reclined seat.
Warning?
Indeed, the attendant said. Exactly that.
Okay, Drano said boredly. What's the warning.
The man pulled back as if held by the center and elongating at the limbs, and light splashed down upon his gamboge and greedily his form drunk from it and he pirouetted, his chunky black sneakers scuffing nimbly over the stone slab flooring, and he enlarged again at the window, eyes demented and wide and their whites yellowed as if nicotine stained from cigarette smoke. The moon something barely visible behind his right ear. He went on.
I will tell you this. Sometimes you need to walk quickly to keep warm, even when you are very tired. Sometimes you will need to stay still and do nothing but endure excruciating pain. But no matter which direction this car takes, I will tell you there is nothing in a destination ultimately but stone and earth and eventual fossil. And that these too become idols. Rather, they have all the properties sufficient to constitute and serve as pathetic idols for those who fall to their worship. Perhaps it could be said that the very earth itself is not but a complex fossil already finished in the mind of the galaxy, spinning black lit in some millionth quadrant, the small and clustered wanderings upon it no more than those bacterial and mycological meanderings found on any piece of raw nature.
Alright, listen, bro, we're trying to get back on the road. I appreciate you talking with us.
The attendant gestured with his eyes and chin to Waffle. He understands.
Drano turned to look at Waffle, who shrugged.
That's cool and all but we're going to head out, okay? Thank you again.
The man stood woodenly there. On taking a journey such as yours, from what I can tell by its properties, the traveler generally returns to find the original point of departure in a state of ruin.
Alright, nigga, watch your feet.
Drano started the car and rolled up the window and the man touched his earpiece and was jabbering again in his dark tongue, and he turned and began making his way from the car back to the store's entrance as if they had called him out to service the pump. He did not look back. The headlights flicked out and lit him and he did not look back. He entered the store and the door fell behind him and Drano pulled out of the lot onto the service road, eyeing the dark at his fore and sipping the peach tea and shaking his head. The syrup ran solved into him. Blushing body. Cool waves and water. Seagulls squawking and lifting through the warmth. He glanced over at Waffle.
The fuck was that shit? You was pretty about it, nigga.
That shit was deep. Waffle was staring out of the passenger window, watching the night scenery flit past unraveling in gunpowder black and peacock blue. The lightbulbs above doors.
Nigga, okay. Tell me what the nigga said if you understood it.
Waffle was silent. Drano glanced over at him and rolled his eyes.
Nigga, never do that shit. Don't start nodding when a nigga is talking because you think he's got you beat with his mental. Ain't no nigga passed the secret to all of this that I've run into yet, and ain't no smart niggas cracked the code yet. So don't do that. Niggas, especially white niggas, want you to think they understand something that you can't.
I understood that nigga.

That nigga was speaking in code.
He was talking about death, nigga.
Yeah, nigga, is this the first time you heard of that shit? That a nigga's gonna die? That a nigga live a dangerous lifestyle.
Waffle shrugged and shifted in his seat. He flipped down the passenger visor and wipe-slapped at his green hair and flipped it back up and gazed again out the window.
What you think about his warning? Waffle asked.
Okay, nigga, what was the warning again?
Waffle sat silent. He fidgeted with his hands a bit while Drano looked at him irritably, finally drawing up his legs and gesturing weakly at the center console, eyes watery and huge and bloodshot.
Can a nigga get some drank?
No.
Nigga, how much you got with you?
Don't me ask me dumb ass questions, nigga.
Let me buy a line, nigga.
The shit is not for sale.
Okay, so a nigga leave everything behind to come with you and you won't even sell a nigga a line of lean.
Leave everything behind? What. Getting booked, nigga? Shut your bitchass up.
They drove in silence, lights sucked backwards along their windows and off forever hanging in the wind and the approaching rain. Waffle rubbed his hands together and glanced at Drano and back out the window. He spoke with his eyes on the grey rush of scenery.
You believe in God, nigga?
I'm having trouble right now.
You think it's Jesus? Waffle asked.
If it's a nigga, yeah.
Waffle paused. He traced his finger on the passenger window. He looked to Drano.
I thought a nigga was supposed to like protect you, you know, like make sure you all good or whatever. Like, if you believe in God or Jesus, nigga.
Yeah. That's how it's supposed to go, I guess, nigga.
Waffle was become unusually animated. He went on. My mama had me believing in Jesus since I was a shorty, like, I can't remember a time before she wasn't talking about the nigga. But, like, the shit we've gone through. Where is this nigga at?
Drano drove considering for a moment. Waffle was watching him, waiting for him to speak. He glanced over to Waffle, his eyes the size of a child's in his vaulting head.
I don't know. I've thought the same thing, nigga. I don't know. I was, like, maybe this nigga edged me out of some even worse shit. But that's still, like, okay, nigga, this is what I still got to pick from. Like, I want Jesus to get me out of either. But, nigga, we are not altar boys. Nuns, nigga.
What choo mean?
I mean, how much illegal shit you think this nigga finna cover for and dodge?
Waffle nodded with his head tilted, as if he held it so for the idea to enter the better.

Drano coughed. He looked at Waffle. I knew we had to leave, nigga, that was it.
Waffle nodded and slouched in his seat and pulled the plastic bag of cannabis again from his pocket and the leaves and he took up again in this little practice, crackling the flowers into a rough chartreuse crumble across the tobacco leaf. Drano drove along the service road and he ramped up back onto the highway and slid as if dragged leftward into the center lane and the ten million white strips of paint flicked under him as the night shifted to its blackest, a dark tapestry from which the moon hung back in horror, draped over the interstate, lowering gradually as if for purposes of menacing those below alone and stinking of burial earth and rags rank with humus and pitch. See it there, slumping down upon the telephone poles and the endless wires and the invisible dark birds tilting this way and that, clutching the cords and sidestepping along as so needed. Drano looked over and Waffle had fallen asleep with his flowery wares still unassembled in his lap. He sipped from the peach drank and set it clinking back into the center console and the pink liquid slosh through him palliatively, and his nerves seemed as if encased in warm glass and he eyed the bottle and the fleshy carmine fluid therein. He thought of how the light had caught the tunnels in the woman's head and how he had seen clear to the wrinkled pink brain left intact there at the bottoms of the holes, and he thought again to himself that he should have gone back for her. He thought then of the snake, how it swung its sick wet head at Drano and looked at him with eyes yellow and horizontally blinking. How it looked at him so, but confidently, as if having sat boredly expecting him for some time and in no way threatened by nor partial to his person. Drano looked out at the endless road and his eyelids sagged involuntarily and he shook himself awake and lit a cigarette and rolled down his window and they drift shut a moment later and he willed himself awake until the next hotel and drove gripping the wheel as if it might fly away from him, the road dark as if he drove through an explosion of ten million bats, and the glens ands grassy hills along the side of the highway seen from this vantage resembling the shapes of a hippopotamus. Exurbs beyond twinkling in their squared remove and their preened greenery. He shifted lanes to the right, a green sign glinting white along the perimeter ahead, and coming upon it, he saw with relief signage for a motel and he raced as if against his fatigue and arguably intoxicated state along the tilted roadway exit, and curving around the laid stone course he followed the increasingly bleary signs and tapped Waffle, who shuffled awake and asked if they were being arrested, and Drano told him they were about to be at the motel, but that he was nodding out and needed Waffle to keep him awake. They drove together in their respective exhaustions and pulled into the single-story motel parking lot. The sky greying now having passed through apex black, and new birds taking up an unfamiliar chitter about the gravel parking lot and in the bush beyond. Drano stumbled into the lamp-lit reception room, rolling his eyes at nearly every process involved in being alive save pouring and drinking juice. Waffle watched through sagging eyes from the car as his friend, this wild genius of a felon, stood impatiently in the mustard light of the lobby, yawning and looking about as if he were in a jail cell, and he came tumbling out grinning, eyes slanted, jingling a pair of keys in his hand. They had made their first stop.

XX

The man held the phone in his hand and his hand was trembling and his loins hardened. There was sweat upon him and he stood in his leather overalls with the holster tighter than usual, as he had spent most of the evening reinforcing the doors and restoring the various altars of the chapel

the nigger had disturbed. The man would have to replace both doors, ultimately, but he managed to wrangle the subject and the snake back into the temple and lock them in effectively. The woman babbling kindly as the man shuffled her through the anteroom into the temple. Looking him directly in the eyes with kindness and yammering and he looking away at once. The serpent he had picked up and ushering the subject back into her destiny, he kissed the waving head of this creature and ran his fingers about the length of it and it seized and lunged away from his grip toward the woman's face and he held it the tighter and kissed the shimmering black scales again and set the snake down respectful upon the stone floor of the temple. The woman was standing naked in the corner facing outward smiling. A tear was running down one of her eyes. The man pulled the door shut and fashioned an outer lock from a two-by-four and nails and he shut the pair within and worked in conference with his master on the restoration of the altars, apologizing profusely for not having secured their church. For having failed the very master who took him like a babe left in the wilderness. The master who had already begun to change him. For his tail was nearing something like initial pronunciation and, with more milking, it would almost certainly grow as his master had directed. The wings, if he earned them, after that.

And his master did speak to him volubly as the man stooped to the fragmented skull and molding flesh clattered on the floor, saying, now though I be in loving possession of you, what has occurred here is this: You have received a letter. And now you must reply to that letter. That you have not secured my quarters sufficiently to keep a wandering nigger from stumbling is an issue that will remain unresolved between us until it has been resolved elsewhere, in more places than one. And a worthy reward would have known this and it seems you did not, as the nigger. As two niggers, rather, were able to with little more than their hands, a sliver of alloy steel, and their shoe heels. The man stood breathless and blushing hotly in the anteroom. He pull the crooked door against the wooden slat of the makeshift gang lock and it held firm and a sliver of the temple was visible from where the door had splintered down the jamb and the woman could be seen, for the man put his eye to this sliver, standing and babbling and playing with her hair. Tears sliding slowly from one of her eyes. The snake wild again at her feet, raising up at length and swaying as if its movements were the conducting of some dark secret wind alone. He turned to the main altar. The scattered craftwork and, had the nigger understood the meaning, he probably still would have destroyed it, and the man decided in that moment that the subject would die that night, for she had been seen in the video stumbling about the room disrupting the materials, as well, and he worked, his narrow pink brow beaded with sweat, apologizing generously and contritely to his master again, reassembling the scattered gore to its an approximate of its former incoherence. And the master spake to him again, saying, I see that you elected to wear your ritual garb for this occasion, as if it were a moment to celebrate. Perhaps between us, you thought. I declare it an interesting choice, because all I see afore me is desecration. Desecration. And a nigger victory. A subject who could have walked out of the house. Or have you perhaps brought some new gift for me, yet to be announced? Known only to you and not yet me. Master, I. You what, my reward? What is it that you could think or say that I have not drafted up, considered, revised and finally submitted for you to burp out some years later pitifully. Master, I am yours. I will correct this for you, my master, and forgive me for having dressed so it is my preference to wear the holster and overalls whenever entering in any formal capacity. The man looked meekly over the restructured altars, what change there lay now between its original form and meaning

only the man and his now silent master could know. Putrescense reeled in the room from the manipulation of these remains. The man stood breathing there like a tarantula and he held the broken skull in his hands and his master allowed him a final image of the owner's last breaths and how he had sloughed the skin off her arms and pulled them ripping over his own. Visions of her working in his invisible empire. The man went about mumbling gently to his master and he corrected and lit each candle that had been knocked down in the fracas, and caramel colored light started up to quivering from each of these sequentially on the walls and the mantle. And he picked up the bits of wax from the stone floor. The fractured bits from the skull now restored to the wall though imperfectly, and he looked the room over and turned and fetched the materials from the workshop and he returned with nails and a second two-by-four and he nailed shut this second door in the same manner and disrobed there at the floor of the stairs, pulling at his hair and rubbing dust from the corners of the floor on his head, praying aloud.

Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field. He never died. The tree bowed him to the wheatblown earth and all of the material world obeyed him thereafter, and he would not and could not die and riches became his and under a thousand names he ruled a thousand kingdoms and a second one unseen and he did not die in a potter's field, in fact, he never even knotted a noose upon that clutching fabled bough. He hid in the earth for a hundred years in conference. And emerged.

The doorbell rung. The man changed back into his work clothes and locked the basement door. Blue and red lights wheeled about the dark of the living room. He opened the front door.

Hidy, Sir. Sorry to bother you. There was a burglary next door at Mr. Chang's house so we were just coming by to see if you had yourself any unwanted visitors. Or anything missing.

They were robbed? The man said.

Yessir, a burglary. Wondering if you saw anyone prowling around inside or out. Anything suspicious.

The man put his hand up on the door jamb and he could still smell the scent of rotted flesh upon his person and this filled him with a sort of bombastic secret euphoria and his master subdued him at once.

Well, I've been home from work for sometime and everything is in order in this house.

See anyone prowling around, anything unusual? Car?

No, sir.

The officers looked at one another and both sighed as if some silent issue had been settled between them and they thanked the man for his time and turn back into the revolving crimson and cobalt light. The slant eyed family gathered on the porch next door like tethered dogs as the police pursued the scene within. Sounds of muffled crying. He closed the door and hunched through the cool shadows of the living room and, taking up beside the fenestration, he parted the blinds and spent some time abusing himself in the dark room watching the scene outside. Sounds of breathing and nothing else. Characters tumbling about in blue uniform through the quadracolored light like illustrations, and the man stared steadily at the officer with whom he had just spoken. A female officer stood with the crying family on the porch. He drew away from the window into darkness and he pulled from his pocket the nigger's phone. The man turned and clambered up the stairwell and shuffled along the passage and enter the study. Using a wire, the man connect the nigger's phone to a computer. He brought up a screen like a blank black tablet

and upon this he etched heiroglyphically in rudimentary neon green, a clitter of typing like a rock slide at a goat's feet, and the phone was unlocked and all of the nigger's stored information therefrom was transferred in total to the man's computer. The man sat there in the room with the lights off holding the unlocked phone. Cops drift like balloons about the cul-de-sac below. He unlocked the nigger's phone, and he pursued, through the messages and contacts therein, the information deemed necessary. He read the messages with great interest and some difficulty. He could not understand all of the nigger's code, but he parsed out persons and their positions and various narratives, and he marveled at how niggers communicated and he joked to his master about it. His master was unresponsive. The man looked through the pictures on the phone. The nigger was always holding a styrofoam cup, as if posing with it, drinking from it or holding it aloft for the camera. Pictures of a small nigger boy. Guns, as well. Guns that the man did not recognize. Serbian woodstocked miniature automatic rifles of polished chrome and black alloy and banana-clipped. Sleek french pistols of a durable black plastic that would not set off metal detectors. The man looked at the nigger's large head and he wondereds if it was sugar water the nigger was always drinking and again he went through the textual and numeric contents of the phone. This time with a sort of renewed diligence, and he could be seen from the doorway typing addresses and names and phone numbers into a blank white digital square. Watch him now for it is not too late, though it is quite dark in the room. Watch the eyes widen and the hand tremble. The man had found the nigger's altars and his temple and any natural law would dictate that this man, this nigger, necessarily relinquish these to destruction now for the man's kingdom, for the nigger could not understand what his disturbance meant. The severity of his charges. Though this limitation in his understanding is mentioned in no way as exculpatory. Rather, it was decided that a balance was to be achieved in accord with the severity of the desecration. The nigger would die, of course. But the life of a single nigger could not undo the desecration, of course. For he had more than enough of these souls castrate and wild, bellowing anciently and marching and labouring about his fiery corner. Rather, a balance would be achieved. And a sequence. His master's voice rose up in him and gooseflesh ran the length of his arms in the blue swirling light of the computer room and his master spake, saying, when I found you, you were like a babe in the wilderness and I gathered you up and swaddled you in the fur of bears and sheep and rams and held you by the fire to warm you. It was I who escaped into the belly of the earth for a hundred years. The man stood dumb in the polar light, nodding and taking direction.

He had resolved upon his first visit once the police left. They had given him an alibi for the evening already, and he would use it for his master had bade him to do such. The man understood and did not begrudge his master for his superior intellect. He deferred almost exclusively the genesis of anything of virtue to his master. Watch him now, shuffling along hunched over the carpet of the upstairs, his movement slow and weird and almost waxen as if he was some other life form hamhandedly disguised as human in his being. The man entered his bedroom and he flicked the lightswitch and white slid across the room like a sudden rain and he entered the closet and change his clothes. He put on a cheap brown suit that he had worn once and never again, and he put it on, the cuffs rough against his wormy form. He took a tie and stood in front of the mirror above the dresser and he tied it and studied himself and adjusted the knot of the tie again and, if standing at the door observing this secretly, you would hear him say only the words, yes, master, quietly to himself. He stood at the landing at the top of the stairs.

The lights were off throughout the house and the blue light was gone and so, too, the red light, and he descended the stairs and through the Judas hole he scanned the cul-de-sac for any sign of residual police presence and this he did not see. He looked about. He would prepare the kit as directed. The man slouched through the house weakly and the suit swooshed as he moved, and it crumpled widely at his ankles like a child. He turned on the houselights, all of them nearly, and descended to the basement where he outfitted a small leather computer bag with a number of items and passing up the stairs the man did see blood running down from the broken reinforced door and he took this as a great tiding and nearly went to drink therefrom before his master scold him and he ascended the creaking wooden stairs and locked the basement door and fetched the van keys from a drawer in the kitchen and entered the garage. When he reached for the light switch, the man felt a hand holding his and he froze where he stood in terror. The hand was white and veined and it had long nails that were the color of cicada husks and they curled inward upon themselves. A face before him. Hooves at his feet. The voice croaking in the dark, nearly incoherent but aloud it said, Three days, my reward. Then you will begin. Then you will see.

It was three days later that the man came upon Drano and Slime driving through South Central. And it was by chance. Rather, this would be the accepted understanding of their unintentional contact. The man had put his crumpled suit on again that day and he backed the van out of the garage and drove through the empty air in silence and he bore determined through the coastal heat and through the bright orange hammer of sun like a silverfish in flight. Glimmering all the while, seagulls pulling up and off above, and the sea far off to their left folding at the sand. The addresses corresponded to what the man understood to be Drano's residence, the residence where his child was housed, and Drano's mother's residence. The man could not believe how many pictures niggers would take standing in front of their disgusting homes and street corners. He drove to these houses and sat outside of them and imagined scenes of drawn out torture and the final expression of gore considered and revised, reveled in then rerendered. Blacks walked by eyeing him with what appeared to be fear or apprehension. Looking up and down at the man in the car and passing on. He sat in the van with the engine off outside of a single story vinyl sided home with a well-trimmed lawn where California fuchsia and milkweed grew in bunches about the front facing windows, white beardtongues and blue-eyed grass in a mulched patch beside the rain spout. The man watched the door. His master's voice came upon him and he sat at attention, hands on the wheel. A small black boy came tumbling out of the house in a child's basketball jersey and his harried mother was at his back rushing him along and scolding him for some unidentifiable reason and the man did feel his loins harden and he understood in that moment that his life had been theretofore egg shaped. There had not been a point to it. A defined final point. And the casement was brittle, though it be white and smooth and lovely to behold. The man believed that the shape of a man's life, or so his master had taught him, determined the material form his destiny took, were he wise enough to find it. And he believed that if his life was indeed up until that point the shape of an egg, then the embryonic materials encased therein would do little more than they did in foam cartons in grocery store coolers. But his master had given his life a new form, with some final ultimate point established, whereas heretofore he had carried forward without a definite detail that might be reasonably expected to guide all of his actions. And something winged perhaps might grow from that shape. From the egg of that life. He had promised. The man unconsciously went to

reach for the small of his back and stopped himself, watching the still shouting young black woman back her beaten car out of the driveway. Outside Drano's aunt's house earlier that day, the man had crawled into the back of the van and disrobed until naked and writhed on the floor holding the phone until he spent himself, whereupon he dressed and watched the unpersoned house and drove away.

When he drove to Drano's mother's house, it was twilight, and he found her sitting on her small front porch in rocking chair wearing a purple summer dress and a widebrimmed ladies hat upon her head. There was a glass of iced fluid beside her. She was waving herself with the newspaper as a fan and apparently doing little more than this. He watched as her eyes swang slowly towards him in the van and at the last moment looked away. The nigger's mother. He stood staring down for sometime, muttering. Drano's mother had shuffled up holding her hip with one hand and still waving the newspaper and she came up to the van's window and greeted the man brightly and theologically and she asked if there was something he needed, that she could help with. Her large brown smiling face at the window.

Hello, young man. How are you on this blessed day? A hot day, whoo, Lord! But a blessed one. She winked at him.

The man regarded her blankly from the driver's seat. He could not believe how superstitious and stupid niggers were.

Are you lost honey? You been settin' out here for a spell and I'm sitting there wondering. This boy must be lost. God sent him my way and maybe I can give him direction. So you know what I did? I pulled my big behind out of the chair to come on over here! How's that, love?

What is your full name, he said, studying her unselfconsciously.

Well, there you are, dear! My name is Harriet Sally Oldham, dear. And what is your's, young man? And have you taken Jesus into your heart? I've prayed with every, every, every type of person, dear.

I'm lost. The man said, quaking with the impulse to begin now without regard for the daylight or the witnesses or anything, living or not, that might at this moment stand between him and the insanely conducted murder of this woman reeling through his mind right now as he set in the hot van with sweat gathering on his small brow.

O, dear! Well let me help you, sugar! I was just thinking that, I swear before God. I said, this man is lost, Harriet. God wants you to administer to him. Forgive me, dear. Okay. Where you trying to get to?

The highway. The one-ten.

O, my, well, God bless your soul! You ain't but two minutes from it sugar! Sometimes God lets us think we're lost when we're just a few minutes from our intended destination, yes, sir, and amen.

Where is God, the man said, interrupting her with a specific intention to do so rudely and doing so in a slightly raised and tremulous voice. Her face changed at the window. She could smell something unidentifiable but putrid issuing new and sickening from the inside of the van. She had not smelled this before. The sun hung behind the man's window and he was a crumpled and shaking black silhouette asking again where the God was that the woman spoke of. She took her hand from the car, uncertain but engaging nevertheless.

Well. He is everywhere.

I don't see anything. I see a street. I see houses. Lawns.
Well, she said, smiling again, He's inside all of that. And around all of that. And you know what, darling? He's inside you. The woman pointed with her finger toward some point either on the man's torso or his suit, he was not certain. She took up a kerchief and held it to her nose there from the sidewalk so strong was this miasma suddenly upon her. The man looked down to where she had pointed as if to wipe away whatever it was she had brought attention to, straightening his suit and shirt with his hands and sitting upright to do so.
The woman at the window laughed. No, sweet thing. He is inside your heart. Your spirit.
The man was looking forward mutely. He understood that he smell in this moment and he wished her nose to feast upon it. He had both hands upon the wheel of the car and his grip could be heard as he swiveled it slowly squeaking in frenzied anger. The man thought of how when he stove in her face, the woman's large naked body would still jitter and resist but wordlessly until there was just stillness and cold and she took up her rightful place in endless terrifying labor in his master's labryinth.
Why would God be invisible, he said. He was watching the road, the middle distance, insane with anger. He slid his hand across the seat and she did not startle and so he let his hand fall further inside the computer bag.
He wasn't, honey. Not always. Still ain't, in my opinion. He was here. He was here as a man named Jesus Christ. Not two thousand years ago. God was here. He used to appear to those people in the Bible, too, in the old days. But I think he ain't too happy with us down here that he feels like paying anyone no personal visits.
Why did God make you so fat, he asked.
Her face changed. Well, that's a rude thing to say.
You are fat. The man spoke still without looking at her. His hand was now upon the revolver's handle inside the briefcase.
God made me however I am. And however I am, I am proud of, because that is how God made me. Now, if you need directions to the highway, I can give you those. But if you want to insult me, then I'm just going to go on back to where I was set before and drink my tea.
It was dark outside now. The streetlights came upon. The man sat with his hand on the gun and he drew it up and nearly to sight and let it slide back down into the shadowed padding of the case. He told the woman that there was nothing she could possibly tell him that he did not already know, this including the directions to the aforementioned highway, and he started the car and drove away, as she stood fanning herself in confusion, and he could see through the rearview mirror as she made her way shuffling through the evening heat back to her seat.
When he pulled on the highway, it was not a minute later that he had recognized the nigger's car from pictures. It was a red that was closer to black than it was red, and it was recognizable. The nigger took many pictures in front of it, holding his cups of sugar water. The man did not allow himself to fully accept that this was the man in front of him on the one-ten and although he could see distinctly the nigger's large head and that this nigger driving was, at this very moment, sipping from one of his huge styrofoam cups. The man rode upon him anonymous in his white van and suit, changing lanes to look in from the parallel lane and he saw the nigger and another with dreadlocks whose visage he half recognized from the phone's pictures and he fell back and followed along, giddy with the manner in which the universe had convened so as to unfold

directly before him and him alone and he conveyed this deference in correction to his master's will and did so unbegrudgingly and without bitterness and he drove along following Drano off the highway and through this nigger city and for the second time today, to Drano's house, and he slowed almost to a stop, and then stopped altgother, watching the men fall from the doors of the car into the street. His master told him as he watched these men and their backs across the lawn that he must follow the prescribed sequence, as without sequence his plan is perhaps, at best, egg shaped, and he thanked his master and understood and the sun had fallen by the time the man returned to Drano's house, following him, and through dark he drove again. Leaving the men for the time being. That they were armed, it seemed, perpetually, according to what the man had gathered from the phone's pictures, was not of concern for him. He believed the nigger to be a predictable creature that was easy to control and that it had little command of its life. Their deaths were equally without locus. He drove through the night and the air was warm and clear and the sun had vanished silently in the void and the void rose up like a great bloodsoaked vulture and the man understood as he slid through the residential streets that he would have to take up for sometime in a parking garage until the late reaches of night fell and he passed along, watching the niggers with a sort of horrified curiousity, and they him. He pulled up the ramp of an untended parking garage where the original color of the walls was almost entirely lost in the swarm of graffiti and he shook his head at how the nigger could not respect even the walls of the buildings of their own community and that this lesson was all the more necessary and he sat staring ahead straight in conference with his master when a young black man in a green hooded sweatshit and blue sweatpants knocked at the window of his car. The man looked at him and waved his hand in an almost shooing gesture, saying, no, thank you, please leave me alone, and he looked straight ahead so as to end the interaction and the black in the hooded sweatshirt rolled his eyes and knocked again on the window and he held his hand between where his sweatshirt met his pants across the front. The man rolled down the window and said, no, thank you.

What you think I just gave your ass a gift or something?

The man sat in the car and looked ahead. He felt himself flushing.

I said, No, thank you. Now, that will be all.

The black put his right hand on the hood of the van and rolled his eyes again in a gesture brief as a spark's life.

What the fuck is you doin' here?

What?

I said, what are you doing here nigga? Do you know where you at?

Yes. I'm a detective.

The man vanished almost at once and could be seen in immediate withdrawal down the ramp and then through the slanting stone rafters the man did see him shuffling away harried on the sidewalk below, tugging at the hood of his sweatshit and looking all about his person. The man smiled. He was making a plan in his mind for the nigger's child and the child's mother. From the text messages, the man had vaguely surmised that the couple were not, indeed, a couple and that much acrimony garlanded the nigger's attempts to enter the life of his son. The man did not understand niggers and again he chuckled and shook his head. He looked about and he drank from a thermos he had brought and he felt the change coming upon him and the restless euphoria and he moved to the back of the van and held himself in lurid poses, nude, and abused himself

and moaned and the night outside is a limpid bath of moonlight and blue vapor and the tropical flora bob easily in the wind and dragonflies could be seen, closer to the ocean, darting nearly invisibly over marshes and ponds and here and, when you return here, see the streets, how the heads enlarge and constrict passing hither and thither, up and down and so, too, did the man then walk the stairs of the parking garage, dressed again in his crumpled brown suit, up and down the stairs. With much effort and holding the rail all the while, he walked at his master's bading the stairs in their entire length to the top and back down and this once more before he could return to the car and the master bade him hearken and the man heakened and the master said it is your duty to move up and down through the earth, to move hither and thither and to do this always, and the man nodded his head and not fully understanding thanked his master and lumbered back toward his car and he ventilated the door and slunk in and checked the time and it was sufficiently late to begin and he left the parking garage and drove back first to Drano's mother's house.

The man was at the door with the leather briefcase upon his left shoulder. He had parked his car several streets over, and he had shorts and tee shirt and glasses to leave the house in. Standing there in the brown suit in the door fixture's yellow spatter of light, he looked like some kind of cringing court appointed attorney in clear alliance with the prosecution. The glass the woman had drunk from sat with ice melted on the plastic tray table beside her seat. He thought of tipping it over, but his master subdued him. The man heard crickets and willed himself not to hear them for he did not understand anything of what they said, though they repeated the same sentiment everywhere everynight. And this sentiment he had heard all of his life and still could not understand it and so he willed it away as he understood it to be incoherent and extraneous to him entirely. He rang the doorbell. He could hear the television inside and he heard muted applause. He heard a car passing at his back and it doing so slowly and he kept his eyes upon the door and the floor alternately as the light gathered and accumulated until where parallel to him and he lit up in hideous white light for a moment and left to darken again into anonymity. The door opened and the woman smiled guardedly. She cracked the second glass door open and leaned out and she asked the man if everything was alright and she called him honey again. The man stood crumpled there staring at the door mat. There was fear inside of the woman. He spoke as if gurgling and the night fanned out like poison gas all about them and things were forever frozen in a pose repugnant and unfinished.

I need help, ma'am. Jesus, ma'am. I need to know him.

Her face lit up and she stood with the glass door at her back and embraced the cringing man there before the door.

O, baby, I just knew it! I knew it! Thank you, Jesus. I said, this man wants to know Jesus. Jesus brought him to me. I told you that didn't I?

Will you talk to me about him?

Child, I will talk to you until the cows come home about Jesus. You just gon' have to tell me stop at some point! She laughed. Come on in, baby.

She stepped aside and the man was in the shabby living room with the briefcase and he knew in a matter of minutes he would be in control of this nigger mother until her dying breath and he studied her surroundings intrusively and she followed him about her small home, through the fragrance of a vanilla candle and slim cigarettes. She had a collection of diet soda cans on coffee

table before the television. Green leather couch. Glass sidetables and white carpet that was poorly put down, for it swelled in spots, and one could see the joinery of it when passing out of the room and the light was low in the house and the man walked through, the mother at his fore, laughing as if following a child or puppy on its innocuous pursuit of space and he understood that there was not another person in the house and he understood he could begin and he began half listening to the woman again and he looked to her laughing face and such disgust did he feel that almost immediately he produced the gun from the bag and directed her to the living room couch and to undress. He watched from the edge of the light, with the revolver on her, and she plead profusely, naked in her folds and pockmarking, crying and referring repeatedly to his original request for a conversation about Jesus, and that they could do exactly that, and the man told her to remain calm but she could not do so, holding her hand out of habit to her bare breast as if to calm her heart and pulling it away self consciously, whimpering and rocking and praying and wrapping her arms about her bosom and leaning over on the couch in an effort to cover her naked and cratered loins. She rocked back and forth praying quietly aloud.

Where is Jesus, the man said from the shadows. The gun hovered there extending out of the dark.

She's inside of you. I promise, child. I promise. This is sin, child. In your heart. This is sin.

The man walked forwards in a demented stagger and he push the nose of the revolver hard against her large forehead and with such force did he propel her with the firearm that her head shuttled back and her body as well into the green leather of the couch.

I will tell you something that is absolute fact, and though you will not believe it, it will occur as certain as the sun will rise tomorrow. You will die tonight. And your daughter in law, if you things even arrange accordingly to such titles, and her child will be mine, either in death or life. And your son later. Three generations. Considering what you said before that Jesus is everywhere, I will allow you a moment, and since he is within everything, to restructure as a nurturing ensouled surface from materials herein as such arranged around you, or to materialize here in the form of a human being and say only a word to save your life. He need appear and say only a word. I care not which word.

The woman was sobbing and babbling on the couch, covering her bosom and wiping away at tears and shirking back away from the revolver. The man directed her onto the carpet and she performed as asked. He had her hold herself on all fours on the carpet, naked, and bark. The babble of the television still chattering dumbly in the background. He told her again to pray, that Jesus only say one word, or move one item in the room to save her life, and she set on her knees against the couch and prayed aloud and the man was at her side, deranged, saying, if you renounce Jesus I will not shoot you, and he continued to say this and she shook her head praying and sobbing and she said, if it was God's time to take her then she had to go, and the man was enraged so he made her again at gunpoint act as a dog on all fours, and he sat on her back and he harassed her again about her weight and she was sobbing as she barked and praying in a sort of dissociative trance and her breasts hung almost to the floor and the man pulled her wig from her hair and walked her in front of a full length mirror and held her there before her reflection at gunpoint, the image crying and praying alternately. They were standing at the mirror. The man had brought a pillow from the living room couch.

Say you renounce Jesus. Say, I don't believe in Jesus. He did not save me.

The woman scrunched her mouth shut tight and shook her head and he put the pillow to the barrel of the gun and shot her through it in the side through the ribs, the bullet ripping a great gaping crunch of bones and calloused lung flesh through her and she went wretching and crashing into the mirror and it shattered all about her and the man cursed her and removed his suit as she writhed in terror from the floor and he slouched out and set his garments folded in the dining room next to stacks of newpaper and mail and he returned to the woman naked with the gun in his hands, his loins hardened and new fear in her eyes and he tells her again to say it and she will not, and he bends down and holds the pillow up again and shoots her in the kneecap and it tears away clean from her large brown leg as a single black skinned plate and there where the kneecap had been set could be seen pink and red torn muscle twitching, and torn white bone and something else anneloidal therein and twitching at the topmost perimeter for attachment, and she howled out and he held the gun on her and he went to the bag and got the gag and he came back and she refused, shaking her head away and gritting her mouth shut and he began beating her about the head with the handle of the revolver until she relented and he placed the ball inside of her mouth and strapped it about the back of her stockinged head, and he wandered through the house, rubbing himself along the walls nakedly and writhing in the sheets as she pant panicked through her nostrils alone and with one lung. He could hear her hoarse heaving vaguely and he found the sound annoying. The man got up from his doings and went over to the woman demented and took the gag from the her mouth and she broke free spanting horridly and wheezing onto the carpet, no longer aware of her nakedness and the man told her that if she renounced Jesus right now, he would spare her, drive her to a hospital, spare her grandchild, his mother, her son, and she had the power right now to do that if she renounced Jesus Christ and she reeled inside of herself and thought of saving them and Drano was in sin and would die in sin if this man was telling the truth and she could not will herself to do it knowing that this was a trap of the devil and that this man wanted her soul, he had already decided upon the death of her body, and she would not give and he put the pillow upon her back and nudged the nose of the gun into it over her vertebrae and he fired and she went slack and her eyes rolled onto him and her mouth moved though it made no words and he smiled passive agressively into her dying eyes as she watched him entirely blank and objectively and he said, Jesus Christ came to earth and men who had mastered the material world took his life and humiliated him without the least of effort and he was demonstrated as the true inferior and God looked away, and the man looked away at the last moment and her eyes roll back and she died there on the blotting carpet and the man mount her a moment later and spasm wildly, ejaculating almost immediately and going to the fridge and taking it from it a bowl of tapioca the woman had prepared and he ate this naked in the house in the shadows of the kitchen, watching the television from the shadows, the woman stone dead upon the floor. The man sat on the couch for sometime and he started muttering to himself furiously and he mount the woman on the floor again and spasmed weirdly against her, muttering insanely still, trembling with rage it seemed, and he ejaculated again and moaned shrieking and buried his face in the old woman's dusty billowing fleshy bosom and screamed until his lungs were hoarse, as he wander about her side and back for the bullet wounds with his hands and penetrating these digitally and giggling and sobbing alternately and then, muttering furiously again, he got up as if from a sudden fall and stood on the woman's head and the skin of her face stretch around to the floor and he willed himself to bobbing on it but it would not

buckle, and he stepped off of her and went to the dining room with the bag and put on the jogging outfit and he put the folded suit into the satchel and he went out of the backdoor and ran around the backyard and through the next yard and then out to the street and, jogging with arms at right angles, and he crossed over the street again and passed along under the cherry blossoms through the night wind panting. He followed the sidewalk and had not seen a car yet and he passed along an iron gate and turned down a lane of houses and the van was there and he lowered his features from view and moved almost blindly to the van staring at the pavement and the door yielded and he set in the driver's seat and set the bag on the passenger seat. Moonlight in a small pool there. The man put the keys in the ignition and started the car like an automaton. He stared vacantly through the windscreen at the pulse of fireflies. The cursive flight paths of moths into and out of the synthetic and flickering lamppoles. The milk moon and the amethyst jewelry of night draped all about it. The man pulled away from the curb and passed along further through the midnight city like some strange dark rider trotting horsemounted into a sleeping village.

He passed along through his own grid of hell and so passing he returned to where the nigger's child lived and he drove past the home, slowing and studying the windows and front door. Blue light pulsed at one of the bedroom windows. The man turned left at the next stop sign and he drove along two blocks and turned left again and he drove down a parallel lane and parked the car in front of an unlit house with a neglected front yard where dark green kudzu spiked out wildly. He unbuckled and climbed into the back of the van where he changed once more into the brown suit and tie and he conveyed the jogging outfit back into the leather satchel. He sat crosslegged in the oversized suit with his back to the van's wall and he fetched the leather satchel and brought it into his lap and he took the revolver out into the darkness and into the moonlight. He pulled a cubical box of ammunition from the satchel and from this he plucked three gleaming, pristine bullets and these he conveyed into the three empty slots in the revolver's barrel. He returned the box of ammunition and the gun to the leather bag and he climbed into the front seat. The man sat for a moment conferring with his master looking vacantly through the windscreen at the shadows and the street afore him. The man was bade to hearken and so he did and his master spake, saying, A room of diamonds. Carved out of the center of the earth, a creek of milk and honey purling at the edges. Such were the preparations I was met with upon my embedding in the earth. For the material earth, my reward, is something that seeks to perpetuate itself as much as any living thing upon it. And that it might seek this perpetuation by means that are indifferent, ruinous, and even fatal to men is certainly a notion worth considering. For is it not that we live upon a thing? A creature. A thing that is now and has forever been host to and given forth any number of creatures or beasts that would rend us were we stood aside it. That the earth not only gives forth beasts that are sui generis threatening to the sophisticated man, but that these creatures of cold and warm blood all perform some essential function for the thing itself is sufficient in and of itself to demonstrate that the earth is a thing whose essential teleological function is not to ensure man or man's well being. I have seen the human hollows where men perished in lava and their souls entrapped there in the stone gnashing in absolute darkness, outer to all and inner to none. Child shapes. I had lived ten thousand years before the earth took me like a mother in the night into its bosom and conveyed me lovingly into a room of diamonds whereabout a thin crick of milk and honey spun purling and this I drank from and, my reward,

you must understand that the earth so much as it might generate forces or creatures that are perilous to men, the man whose actions are such that they contribute substantially to the dominance of the material earth. This man the earth will almost axiomatically seek out and preserve. My reward, understand that I have set you on this path. That you were a babe in a basket set adrift on a river and I reeled you into the safety of my skiff. Animals know this. Though they might all heartily survive on the foliage and fruits of the earth, it is through the demolition of an inferior species through which center their lives and nutritional survival.

The man nodded and opened the door and slipped from the seat down to the pavement. He shuffled along through the shadows across the street with his bag slung at the shoulder, straightening his tie and keeping his face down. There was no one outside, though he could hear the distant thump of nigger music and yelling some streets down. He shook his head in the darkness and followed the sidewalk, drifting hunched through the bat colored dark and muttering inaudibly to himself all the while. The night almost chariot like conveyed his wretched form over the cream colored sidewalk and, walking, he took from the briefcase Drano's phone. He unlocked it and he called the woman he had discerned through their scathing illiterate correspondence to be the mother of Drano's child. He held the phone at his side and he could hear the weak thrum of the ring and he hung the phone up and, turning the corner, the house was before him. The man crossed through the adjoining yard and giddiness was growing within him now and he hunched along as if fevered now, following the grey slate stone walkway to the front door. There were sparrows clustered in the moonlight along the walkway ticking around and, reaching the door, the man rung the doorbell repeatedly some ten times or more. A window lit up at the far side of the house and the man perceived this and felt satisfaction, for he was irritated that she had not already opened the door, and he stood waiting in the iridescent lantern light and he heard footsteps behind the door and a nigger woman's voice. And the man did hear the door creak and watched as it pressed against it's frame outward as the woman leant against the Judas hole and studied him. He stared directly at the small glass eye. The door opened slightly and a young black woman with a patterned scarf knotted about her head peered out with swollen eyes.

Can I help you?

Ma'am, I need to talk to you about your son.

It's, like, two o'clock in the morning. Is everything okay?

I'm sorry to say there's been an emergency.

What happened?

There's been an emergency with the boy's father.

She stepped out of the house in a linen robe and rabbit slippers. O, Lord.

It's probably better if we talk inside, ma'am.

She nodded quickly as if this should have been understood by her before that moment and waved the man into her home where he felt such a rush upon passing through the doorway that he nearly abandoned all pretense in that very moment and lunge at the woman crazily as she walked afore obliviously him. The house smelled of cigarettes and of a frozen lasagna that sat on the stovetop that the woman had warmed that night for dinner. She ushered the man into the living room, turning on the lights and a scatter of toys on the pea green carpet was alit in opaque flourescence along with a television, crudely mounted on fracturing sheet rock, and two couches arranged at an angle beneath the television over which copper colored covers had been fit. She sat down on

one of these and gestured for the man to take up on the other. Her voice was still dry from sleep, crackling back to lubricity with each word. She took the man by the hands when he sat and he was filled with disgust and with great earnestness in her eyes did she speak.
I'm ready, she said.
The man shirked his cold wet hands away and wiped them unselfconsciously across the legs of his pants. He regarded the woman there before him with visible repugnance. That is, as much as the indistinct features of his face could be said to emote. He croaked out a response.
What are you ready for?
You said there was an emergency, sir. I was ready to hear it.
Where is your son, the man said.
He's asleep, Sir. In his bedroom. She pointed from the couch down a darkened hallway at a closed door.
When is the last time you heard from the father, ma'am?
She sat upright on the couch. Certain.
I seen he just called me when I woke up to get the door. So, Drano alive, I guess?
The man shook his head. The woman collapsed into her hands saying, O Lord, and babbling in irritating spiritual nigger tones. The man told her to stop and she sat upright again and she attended him. The lower lids of her eyes held tears in elastic and trembling tension and the overhead lighting shone through them tremendously, alighting her eyes in display as if not only the woman herself but the entire room had formed outward in perpetual service of these watery globes. The man cleared his throat. She sat regarding him expectantly.
The phone was found at the scene. An officer attempting to reach out to next of kin, most likely.
How did he die? She asked.
He was shot by police. On the side of the highway. After a high-speed chase. He had murdered his mother for some three-hundred dollars.
Her eyes were wide with accumulating grief and she went to collapse and the man held up a hand and she composed herself.
There was evidence he had raped the victim, as well.
She threw her hands up and shook her head vigorously, almost violently, as if the momentum of this might shake this very thought back out of her skull into the aether, or wherever it had resided before taking up within her. The man reached into his leather bag and he found purchase of the revolver's handle and he withdrew it slowly along the far side of his right leg, the barrel slithering up the folding bark brown contours of polyester and rayon. He watched the woman's face change suddenly from grief to confused fear. She stood up from the couch and backed away. She had seen the gun.
What choo doing with that gun, sir?
My apologies. This was found in his possession after his death. We believe it's the murder weapon and need you to confirm whether or not you've seen Darnell ever carrying this gun, or if he kept this in any shared residence.
She clung fast to her robe at the collars and moved toward the couch again, however apprehensively. She leaned and looked at the revolver as if peering into some ghastly well of blood and she shook her head and sat down again.

So, you're saying that, to your knowledge, this is not his gun? The man's brow was sweating and his knee began to jounce.
I have never seen Darnell with no gun like that, no. Darnell ain't fuck with no cowboy guns.
Now you are sure?
She had her eyes closed and she was nodding that she was sure, rocking back and forth on the couch in her bunny slippers, when he cocked the revolver at his side and raised it and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked in his hand from the unusual angle and the bullet entered the woman's face diagonally at the orbital socket of her right eye and it passed out of her head at the right temporal lobe bringing with it a clot of brain matter and skull and the destroyed gelatinous matter of the eye itself. The woman screamed with such force that the windows did actually vibrate though imperceptibly. The man understood that niggers shot guns in their villages frequently and the noise of the report did not concern him so much as this wailing. And it was not so much concern as hate that the wailing brought up in the man. Cerebrospinal fluid could be seen trickling out of the woman's skull the color of water and falling to wet the blood slaked shoulders of her tattered robe and dark blood did run downward steadily from that smoking pink cavity where her eye had been and her cheek was lost in blood and she wailed again. The man took a pillow from the couch he had sat upon and he put it over her face and setting the gun on the glass of the table, with both hands did he attempt to suffocate the screaming mother. For several minutes she struggled beneath him, lashing about and bucking like a caught animal. When she managed a hand free and clawed the man's face, dragging downward and hard and desperately on whatever part of this man's flesh she had found purchase of, he drew away immediately, shrieking. He took the heavy revolver tinking from the glass table and as soon as the woman shoved the pillow away from her face, the man fired and the second bullet met her forehead and peeled back everything above that point, taking in grotesque fulmination the top of her scarved skull and swinging it back towards the wall where it hung behind her still attached by her hair extensions and what remained of her wrecked brain could be seen in laminated pink folds grooved with dark blood and the man stood over her and with both hands did he slop these remaining parts of her brain upon the floor and the couch alike until he could palpitate through this aperture, the clean and wet intact curves and hollows of the inside of her skull. He let go and the woman slid limp between the couch and the coffee table. She fell sideward from there, her head indifferently striking the glass corner of the table and slumping down on the dusty green carpet. The man walked out of the living room and he entered the boy's room. The boy was sitting up in bed when the man entered and the man startled at the sight of the nigger child awake there. He could see the nigger's face in the child there. Similarly macrocephalic and slant-eyed. Dark skin. White teeth. The man hung in the darkness at the door in silhouette, his slumped form in the huge blood smeared suit, he looked like some kind of folkloric troll barrister who met with clients exclusively at night in their bedrooms to discuss the legal implications of the various transgressions they had committed in dream. The man spoke first.
Hello. Will you come with me?
Where's my mommy?
Come look. We're having a party for you out here. She's just out here.
The boy scrambled out of the bed at once and swept past the man searching out the party. Cascading into the living room, bounding on his little leg's the narrow length of the house, the

boy did not see balloons or cake or other children or any of the trappings his mind had seen when the man said there was a party. He padded around the corner of the couch and saw his mother on the ground and he went up and crawled over her unresponsive, pretzeled form, cradling her ruined face and head and bading her speak, and glancing back over his shoulder and beginning to sob, the man was upon him, entirely naked. The boy screamed and the man gathered him up against his damp nakedness and the boy struggled against him kicking and flailing and the man grabbed the boy's ear and pulled it so that the rest of his small body went limp and he screamed and the man said that he would do that again if the boy moved and so he remained limp, his ear entertaining a sort of throbbing warp that passed drumming through his small brain. They fumbled wrestling through the dark hallway and the man put the boy upon the bed. The man demanded that the boy undress and he would not. The man demanded again and the boy shook his head and hid under the covers his mother slept in until that night. He smelled his mother, her lotions and hair oil and he called out for her involuntarily. The man came beside the bed, abhorrent and pink in his nakedness, and he turned the lamp on and pulled the sheets from the cowering boy. The man had hair about his nipples and there alone on his torso. He stood hunched and breathing weirdly. The man ordered the boy to undress and this time when he refused the man staggered out of the bedroom wildly and returned with the gun and he held it on the boy and the boy undressed and cowered covering his parts and crying. The man told the boy he had done a wonderful job, and that he was proud of him and he told him to wait. He told him everything was okay now, and that he was going to wake up the boy's mother. That the boy should wait where he was for it to work.

The man drifted out of the room, ghastly naked man faerie of false promise, and down the hallway. The boy heard muffled thumps and scuffing approach and the man's naked crooked back appeared at the door and he had the boy's mother under each of her arms, dragging her into the bedroom. The boy stood up on the bed and put one of his hands in his mouth. He covered his private part with the other hand. The man grunted and with strength that was nearly beyond him he lift the mother's body and let it fall weirdly and limp on the bed beside the boy, the broken skull like a small cave or dashed dinosaur egg at the boy's toes. He looked to the man hopefully and the man went to the lamp and shut it off and through the newly laid shadows he climbed atop the bed and fell upon them wildly with teeth and nail, folding them up into his nakedness. Growling and moaning. Until daylight gathered grey and alabaster and birds could be heard chirping in triplets and winding off through the ragged warmth of morning.

The boy was still alive in the morning, though changed. The man dressed him and put a wool hat on his small head and they departed the house and walked dutifully to the van, the boy dazed and walking as if in a dream, reeking of the materials of the man's pursuits. Small, bloodsmeared body trembling and hidden away in the strange outfit the man had chosen for the boy. The man whispered to him that he was doing a good job. The boy did not look up. They passed along the sidewalk in the greking light like ghosts and, arriving at the van, the man opened the passenger door for the boy and told him it was okay and the stunned child complied and climbed up into the passenger seat and the man went around the car and upon taking up his position in the driver's seat he took the boy by the ear and pulled until he heard the muted crackling of cartilage and the boy howled and fell towards the hand in whatever direction and the man directed the boy to the back of the van by his ear and the boy fell stunned and whimpering upon the grooved

metal flooring. The van began to move and the man spoke and he began, saying to the boy, that the material earth was a thing like any other. That the earth was not the setting of the competition alone, but an indisputable contestant. And that there are men who have mastered the material world. Men who have lived a thousand lives. One who was taken into the earth in a chamber of diamonds, where he was hid away for his service to the earth and told all the secrets of matter and he fed there on milk and honey, enshrined in diamonds. That the boy had been misdirected not only by his nigger mother and father, but by his own nigger blood, was an accomplished fact. But that, because of this, the boy had thereto become mislaid chattel, legally repossessed, followed therefrom. The boy lay whimpering like a dog. He croaked out the word, Daddy, into the floor with the cool metal jostling against his cheek. The man went on, saying, I have found you like a naked babe in the wilderness. When I found you last night, it was like coming upon an abandoned child, naked and starving in the forest. The boy stared void at the epiphemera of light and shadow that trembled and dragged across the van's back wall as they passed onto the highway toward the man's home.

XXIII

There was a male fox crouched in the moonlight, wet-furred from the night rain, in a passage of tinkling trees in a forest outside of Arkansas on the Kentucky side. The fox shook himself and water danced away from him in spectacular molecular explosion and he snuffed and lowered his orange white muzzle and sniffed about the wet ground and it was rich with the fragrance of creature and nourishment and he pawed through the leaves and sniffed more at the naked pitch and ticked his ear up and moonlight caught his eyes as tricolored rings and he bound over a fallen log and went loping, forest blurring at his sides on both sides, bouncing forward through the wash of smells curling up out of the rain rent soil and he came upon a particular scent and he followed along it carefully and rain dripped from his mottled ginger fur and he passed along, skipping almost, and scrambled spiritlike down a slope of leaves and passed over a road, a surface that was alien, and he did not at first see, so closely was he following the scent, the two men with black faces crouched there on the far side of the trees, watching him, stockings about their heads. The one with the large head shift in his position and a leaf cracked and the fox flicked his eyes up at them and bound off at once like a flame zigzagging off into actual darkness, leaving the men and the scent and moving on to other scents and toward and away from other creatures. Static whirred loudly from the bush where they set. Drano slapped Waffle across the back and sharpened his eyes at him.

Nigga, why are you fucking with that now? I'm right here.

I'm just making sure it work, my nigga.

Nigga, we did that. Shit is loud as fuck. Put it away.

Waffle frowned and looked at the walkie talkie wistfully and wiped it across his breast and returned it to the center pocket of his sweatshirt. Rain dripped from the boughs and the men looked up in disgust around them at the droplets on their sleeves and the serpentry of bucolic things from which they fell, as if it was some contagion ectoplasm slipping off the sweating limbs of huge alien creatures under whom they were held captive. Everything clicked about the dark forest and the moon was shrouded with clouds and prismatically it gave off a blue light that lit the waters on the leaves and the eyes and teeth of the men. Their fingernails. It smelled of spruce and juniper and wet earth. Drano nodded to Waffle and the men swooped down like a pair

of hawks across the road and up the counter slope, leaves sloughing away underfoot to sliding mud and they crested the bank and passed into a second cluster of trees where trotting along a row of backyards rose up into sight and they moved through the forest single file like mimes, their movements stealthy and yet somehow histrionic, the light bizarre on their passing forms. Ducking and crouching through the rolling fog. Rows of black maple and white oak. A line of black gum trees at the lawn's edge with lustrous and waxen leaves hosting pale blue moonlight within glistening globoids of water. Drano and Waffle passed on suchlike and stood panting beneath this line of plasticine looking tree's at the yard's edge, stockings over their heads like two huge rag dolls ensouled and cursed to wander the wet earth in secret at night, glued forever to their crude woven forms. Drano took his walkie talkie out.

Alright, nigga, who's got the bell and who's got the back?

I'll take the back, Waffle said.

Drano rolled his eyes. Alright, you bitchass nigga. I'm a hit the bell. I'm a hit you up on this and tell you what I see. And you tell me your side. You need to practice with this shit again?

Nah, nigga, I got it.

Alright, nigga, watch my back.

Drano, as if carried in the breast of some dark wind, drifted along the yard's edge. He cut in at the property line between neighboring houses and passed between their endarkened windows, his deformed image in triplicate sliding through the murk, as if counter selves harried him on both sides. A dog was heard barking at the adjacent house and Drano sloped along the shadows of the wall through the rain flecked light and the gentle tinkling of fallen rain. He broke at length into the driveway and followed the house around and, passing over the yard a few soft strides, he skipped up the stairs of the front porch. The house was dark. He rang the bell several times and turned and suddenly the earth was spinning away behind him beneath his feet, surprisingly lithe and quick, hurtling across the street and sliding soaked through the grass beneath a furry break of Virginia pine and Eastern hemlock. He moved crablike and serious once there, his belly to the ground, scuttling backward, deeper beneath the dark of the conifer needles and boughs. The grass fragrant and wet beneath him and so, too, the pine of the tree. He managed the walkie talkie up from his pocket up around to his fore there and he jostled it lightly with both hands, watching the house still, prostrate in his bluff. The door had not opened, nor had any lights appeared to turn on within the portions of the house visible to him.

They had come the day before to discover that the family ran a business at night. Drano had hid in this very place in daylight and lay breathing in the shadows, as an elderly Chinese woman in strange garb opened the door and peered out like a small weary sloth, looking both ways with a slow swivel of her head and pulling the door shut behind her. Drano had found the family using a Kentucky phone book the men had misappropriated from a gas station, searching according to various common Chinese surnames with which Drano maintained a sort of Tarot-like cosmological relationship. The house was still dark. Nothing at the door. He propped himself up on his elbows in the slick grass and, taking up the walkie talkie, he chirped Waffle's device.

We good up front. How's the back. Over.

Mane, ain't nobody here, nigga. Fuck, nigga, I got my gun wet. On God if this shit don't work now.

Drano scrambled to turn the device down and he tucked it away in his sweatshirt shaking his head and cursing under his breath in spontaneously generated and acrobatically lingual sequences. Rain shook in a great sheet from the branches above him and this watery lamina collapsed upon the whole of his form. He cursed into the wrist of his sweatshirt in muffled apoplexy and felt a great deal of anger toward Waffle at this, for whatever reason. He moved stealthily upon his belly out from his furred bluff and he stooped over the slick grass until the boughs above gave to sky and he crept along once more to standing. His form he aligned with penumbra and obstruction. He cleaved to the shadows, the perimeter.

Limber he loped across the street, staying within the cool triangular shadow of a Loblolly pine in the house's yard, and he floated along over the wet grass again, following along through darkness and branch and breaking at length into the house's backyard. Waffle saw him appear at the side of the house like something monstrous with the moonlight beaming behind his huge netted head. Drano stooped low again and, as if diving, bound wraith like along the perimeter of the yard, transferring almost, his arms hung out behind him aerodynamically like a cape and, dashing suchlike, he looked up. Waffle's eyes were visible at the treeline. He passed along loping and came curving around the edge of the back yard, taking up beside Waffle beneath the canopy of waxen trees, breathing hard and misting everywhere. Moonlight. Sounds of water as if the trees wore jewelry. Their faces smashed in the stockings. Drano was first to speak. He was still catching his breath.

Nigga, the fuck are you doing talking about straps and shit on the walkie talkie.

It's just you and me, nigga. What you think it's bugged?

Nah, nigga, you right. Maybe I should go to my next burglary with a fucking boombox of you talking about your strap.

Nigga, this shit is soaked.

Drano frowned. Yeah, I was thinking the same thing when I was lying in that fucking grass over there. Nigga got soaked. You see anything on your side?

Nah, nigga. I hit em up and ain't no one even turn on a light.

They stood breathing watching the dark house from the woods. Waffle turned to Drano.

You think we good?

Yeah. Let's do it. You got the bookbag?

Yeah. It's right here.

Alright.

Waffle picked up the bookbag and swung it around his back and they passed together like two rabbits through the dark, darting and checking, following one another and bounding along. They reached the back entrance to the house and Drano stood scanning the periphery as Waffle fetched the flathead from the canvas bag and began working on the door. An automatic light turned on from a flap of birdwings at the house next door. Both men looked. Drano told Waffle it was okay, and he scanned the backyard and the house itself for any lights or movement as Waffle work. He turned to the treeline and scanned it. An owl of snow white feather considered him from the bough of a yellow pine as if in absolute judgment of whatever it was about to commence here and, single eyed and whirling, the bird bowed and shuffled and bore a single golden ringed black eye upon him again and it launched and swept massively across the yard like some storied bird realized once in the bestiary of nature and never again thereafter. Drano watched it. He believed

it meant something, but he was not certain what it meant. He heard the lock fall and the door creak open at his back. He took Waffle by the shoulders.

I'll sweep the top level. You do the bottom level. No scrambling. Just room to room. Mattresses, everything.

Waffle nodded. His eyes were calm and glimmering in the watery light. Drano gave him a pat on the shoulder to begin and the men passed into the house rolling sideward as if skydiving and they ascend a small set of stairs and the pungence of cassia and coriander and burnt piquant incense met them and they found themselves in a dark kitchen, a ceiling fan whooping silently above them, and the men split up. Drano loped towards the stairs and swung around and up the first three using the dark wooden handrail and he leapt up the steps two at a time and, going into the first bedroom on the right, he went to the bed and removed a pillowcase from one of the pillows. There were pictures of Chinese people, black and white photos framed on the dresser and a fan at extension that portrayed a picture of colorful birds with spare treework at their hind. Ceramic sculptures of cats. Drano flipped the mattress and there was nothing. He moved to the dressers and he ventilated this piece of furniture with such force that their release could be heard throughout the entire house, and he fished through these expertly, looking for metal and paper and he found a great deal of metals in the top right drawer in a cushioned jewelry box with Asian embroidery of a pair of huge-eyed siamese cats across the frame. He dropped this small chest in its entirety into the pillowcase and moved on through the drawers, finding nothing else in the bottom pair, and it was in crossing the threshhold to the next room that he ran directly into an elderly Chinese woman, and the sound that escaped her in her eldritch and hysterical passage to the floor was such that it rendered Waffle stone still numb where he stood downstairs listening. Drano was reeling about the landing at the top of the stairs between the next room and the shadowy woman rising from the floor, his eyes rolling about crazily in the dark for other unexpected occupants. He thought of the phone and he yelled to Waffle to take the phone off the hook and he heard Waffle's footsteps pounding along below him, and the old woman cried out again and a younger Asian woman came out of the second bedroom in nightwear at Drano's back and he spun wildly at this and turned and, upon eye contact with the young lady, she fled back into the room screeching. The old lady was shouting in Chinese, now, cursing them and, standing again, she approached Drano holding her slipper and waving it wildly about, and he stood quickly and understood that to avoid the room and get the money he needed to act now and he withdrew his gun from his waist and pointed it squarely at the lady's now suddenly silent head and he walked her into the unintentionally psychedelic lighting of the second bedroom with the younger woman, who was still wailing and actually slapping herself on the carpet. He scanned the room for a phone and he saw the young woman indeed had a cell phone on her bedside table, and their eyes accessed it at the same time and both lunged. Drano stepped hard and took her whole weight with a single arm and redirected her momentum toward the old lady, clearing her to the left of him, and she went reeling into the bedside wall, breaking the drywall, and sank whining to the ground in a slump. Multicolored transparent bulbed cats lit this scene in perhaps a deranged quality perhaps most appropriate. The old woman began in Chinese to the young woman there whining softly and Drano slid the phone into his pocket and he pointed the FN at them and said, No Chinese, and suddenly Waffle was at the door saying, mane, the fuck, and

Drano rolled eyes at him and waved his gun around a bit senselessly indicating the unraveling farrago.

The women sat whimpering on the floor against the wall, cradling one another and rocking. Drano asked if there was anyone downstairs. Waffle told him he had not seen anyone else, but that he had only gone through two of four rooms. Drano told him to check the third bedroom across the landing first and then any place downstairs that someone else might be. He told Waffle to get phones immediately on contact, before anything else, if he saw one. Waffle nodded as a well-disciplined apprentice chef might and hurried out of the room at once and across the hall. He opened and disappeared through the door, and the women looked at each other with curious concern and Drano noted them doing this, FN in his hand, wristwatch dazzling behind the sleek black barrel in diamond-latticed platinum alloy.

Where is the money? He said.

The women chittered like cats in mock confusion, looking between eachother and Drano, and holding their hands to their breast as some lost damsel might. Tbe room had no conventional lighting. The young woman who presumably had chosen to outfit her bedroom with variously colored plasticine cats, each holding a bulb of the corresponding color sat now holding her knees and rocking and staring at the floor. Drano moved through this sort of feline psychedelia wrangling the women. He was sweating now and wanted to take off the stocking. He approached the women on the ground quickly with the gun drawn, and pointed it at the younger woman.

Now. I know this bitch speak English. So, let's not play no games, okay?

The younger woman nodded in sad concession. The older woman took up argument with her at once and Drano leveled the gun at her. Her wrinkled face went silent. He turned again to the younger woman.

Where is the money.

We no having moneys here. We use bank like all American.

Drano rolled his eyes. He took a step closer. Where is the money.

We no having money. Money in bank like American.

As the women spoke, she looked occasionally to her mother, and Drano watched their interchange and much he could glean from their silent correspondence though it brief as the sulfur hiss of a struck match. The women looked up at him.

Okay, so when I tie your dumbass up. And your mama's dumbass. And I go find it. What choo gon say then?

The women clutched one another as if their joinery might prevent their binding. Drano shook his head at their robotic and exaggerated histrionics and he peered out the door and saw Waffle escorting a yawning late-aged Chinese man up the stairs in emerald green silk pajamas that shone in the moonlight to the room.

Nigga, are you kidding me.

There's no one else, Waffle said. What we finna do?

We got to tie these niggas up or something.

Aiight.

Waffle nudged the tired old man through the door by the nose of his pistol and he told him to sit down with the others and the man went grumbling along low to the ground with eyes hardly apertured and swollen from sleep, his pajamas lovely and iridescent in the variegated light. Upon

seating himself, the old man took up what sounded to be argument with the old lady in tones harsh and snarling and she returned the same to him and Drano silenced them. He told Waffle to hold them in the room while he finished the last room upstairs and within that dark room he found under the mattress some fifty-thousand dollars cash and he lit up as if outlined in a green glow, and in the top drawers he found several pieces of jewelry bedazzled and purely alloyed. He slunk over to the closet wolflike, going low and sliding to his knees at the threshhold. He saw himself there in the mirrored door and he looked like something villainous and horrid with the stocking over his head and he thought to himself that his head was indeed huge and he felt suddenly identifiable because of this, and he slid the door and moved aside the shoes and like some kind of possessed mandog he burrowed further into the closet and, sliding his hand along the back wall, his palm came against the curvature of a cool metal cubicle structure. He followed the frame with his fingers and nodded to himself, whispering almost, as well, and he backed crawling out the closet and sat on his knees and slid the reflecting doors to the opposite side, his horrendous image passing twice before him and remaining at his right in an attitude of death and agony. He looked at the safe. It was going to be heavy. Maybe too heavy. He could steal a dollie from them, if necessary, but he wasn't sure if Chinese people used dollies. He stood from the carpet and swatted through the closet at eye level and emerged with a handful of ties, and he passed out of the room across the landing and back into the young woman's room. There was a fourth person on the floor now. Another old man in silk pajamas with eyes arguably closed. Drano looked at Waffle.

Nigga, what the fuck is this?

This nigga just walked on up here on his own and sat down. He ain't said a word yet.

Did this nigga call the police?

They stood looking at him. He looked back calmly. Colors knotted wildly in the room from the effulgent cats. This latest old man looked up at them tiredly and volunteered that he did not call the police and he fell back to silence, eyes closing. Waffle looked to Drano to see if he was satisfied with this and he appeared to so be. Waffle looked at Drano's pillowcase. There was a veritable loaf of cash visible through the translucent white of the fabric.

Damn, nigga, you count it?

It's like a fifty piece. They got a safe.

Drano handed Waffle the tie. You've got to tie these Chinese niggas up. I'm a look for a dollie.

How big is that bitch? Waffle asked, taking the bundled ties.

It's free standing, a forty-inch.

Nigga. That's too heavy.

That's what I'm saying. Let me look for a dollie.

The women and men sat watching, murmuring quietly to one another in their mother tongue and Drano pulled one of the bank-banded stacks of hundreds from the pillowcase and waved it at the younger woman and asked her if her American bank was Sealy Mattress Company and she shied away from this question and hid her face in her mother's bosom, and the mother padded her face and prayed her vengeance in her mother tongue staring at Drano and he winked at her and passed out of the room and they could hear his large feet thumping through their house and glass and metal things clattering variously as Waffle took the ties and bound their arms behind them, all at the wrist, and then bound them to one another in a row, running out of clinching ties at the man

who had volunteered his imprisonment. He sat with his arms bound behind him snoring occasionally. Large thumping footsteps went along the bottom floor in rapid drumming succession and they approached up the stairs growing closer but muted and then Drano was at the door, panting. Waffle looked back, still kneeling beside the last man.

Ain't no dollie, Drano said from the door. Grandpa or Grandma's gotta give up the code.

Waffle's face went sober. Bro. We got like fifty not counting anything I pulled, or the fucking jewelry. Let's get the fuck out of here.

The old lady broke out in open English. You. Get. Out. Poopyhead.

Waffle said, These niggas is all good we can just go, nigga. Just this one tame Chinese nigga I ain't have a tie for but I got his wrists done. The others is looped up.

Nigga, go? Shut your bitch ass up. Take these three niggas you got looped in the next room. Tell them to unlock the safe if they want to help.

The trio looked up in horror. The last man sat in the warp of pink and blue feline lighting, waiting for whatever his captor had planned for him with seeming indifference, yawning. Waffle led the group out, the man at front of the line and the women shuffling with their heads down, yammering incoherently between one another as if in argument and the man resonating out some grave command and them going silent behind him at once. Waffle led them hobbled to one another across the corridor like something out of a medieval illustration, and he brought them to the next bedroom and leveled his own gun at them and told them that one of them was going to give up the code, open the safe, if they wanted it to stop. The group looked uncertain.

Want what to stop? The young lady asked.

Drano in the next room sat with his legs crossed in front of the docile old Chinese man. He stood and pulled a chair from the woman's desk and brought it out and sat before him. He raised the gun from a distance of two feet and held it there, his arm half crooked in his lap for support. The cat lights pulsed above in a sequence of shadow and orb and glow and pigmented light. He looked the man in the eyes with much sincerity.

Start screaming.

The man blinked and cocked his head as if he was uncertain of the command.

He said, What?

Scream. Drano raised the gun and brought it level before the man's eyes. Scream, now. Until I say stop.

The man wailed out in agony or sorrow or sound alone it was uncertain, but it resounded through the house in a horrifying quality that froze time in the minds of all in the home and he so continued to wail as Waffle urged them to help their family member and Drano sat nodding to the man, saying that he was fulfilling his duty with particular efficacy, and the screams went on for some time longer and the woman yelled out in Chinese from the other room in obvious query and Drano put the gun directly to the man's head and shook his head side to side and said, keep screaming until I say stop nigga, and the man continued on, his voice roaring and pained. Like a wounded monster bearing some fatal arrow he cried out. Over and over again. And Waffle was soon at the door and Drano kept the gun trained on the man and looked over his shoulder and Waffle nodded and came into the room and Drano told him to keep his pistol on the man and put it to his head and keep him silent until it was done. He looked at Waffle at the door.

Which one got the code?

The bitch, the younger one.
Drano nodded and crossed the hallway and entered the room and sometime later he came out with the young woman stumbling before him. He walked her into the third bedroom and asked her for the combination and she said that she wanted to open it, that she had to, and for him to untie her hands, because she could not recall it numerically alone. Drano told her to stay where she was. He crossed the threshold and ducked his head in and told Waffle to make the man scream again, until they left. And he strode across through the serpent colored dark of the landing, across the scuffed and matted carpet back into the room with the safe and the woman. She was still standing where he had told her and the screaming took up directly at his entrance. It endured as a sort of raw wave through the house and ricocheted window to window and engulfed like some great haggard body of polluted water the whole of the house's consciousness.
What's the combination.
She shook her head.
He's going to kill him soon.
She gave him the combination. She gave it to him again as he knelt at the safe and she shook her head and frowned and sat on the bed, and she shifted once when he was turned around and he trained the gun on her without hesitation and wrangled her then beside him. And he knelt there, the girl crying at his side, and spun the lock and counterspun it and followed along clockwise until a third number and stopped there. He gripped the handle and it yielded and the heavy door swung open and a few hundred dollar notes did go swaying out into the moonlit room. Drano's body went cool with relief. Stacks of bills of various demarcations nearly six inches high. Four of them, bundled in produce rubberbands. The woman said that was all they had saved and Drano told her to keep quiet and that he had nothing saved. That he had nothing. And he gathered these bills into the pillowcase and slanted across the landing and went into the second room and told the man to stop yelling and the man looked uncertainly first to Waffle, whose gun was still entrained upon him, and Waffle nodded and the man stopped. Drano spoke from the doorway.
Let's go. Now.
The younger woman was at his back now discovering that the peaceable one had gone unharmed. She began shrieking in Chinese and trying to swing her bound wrists around at Drano, connecting once with his side and falling to the floor in vertigo and teary eyed defeat. He said again to Waffle that it was time to go and Waffle leapt up and they were scrambling down the stairs, pillowcases in hands like Halloween monsters, laughing and crazed through the slant moonlit home and its pungent smells and thick air, and they crashed out of the back door like crudely person shaped hobgoblins and broke at length into the yard and loped single file through the grass and through the serried rows of blackgums at the yard's edge and then into the forest, as shadows in flight through the tunneling woods like two possible selves pursuing form itself. Rain dripped from the leaves about them and the light looked blue and phosphorescent about the wet bark and Drano turned and winked at Waffle and Waffle asked how much and Drano, panting, said probably a hundred bands, and Waffle whooped out and Drano glanced over his shoulder with an eye to scold him, for they were fleeing the scene of more than a few felonious enterprises, and the twigs snapped underfoot and they padded along through the dark forest. Woodsmoke hung in the air from some invisible fire and they heard the young woman faintly shrieking from her yard at their backs and they hurtled on through the moonlight and grass and

over the slanted log, the moss sloughing off at their step and scrambling down a slope and crossing a roadway they did see the selfsame fox on his path and he regarded them at once and stood watching them. They passed on and Drano looked back over his shoulder and the bright bright maned fox stood regarding him through neon lenses, and they took up a trot again, crossing the road and cresting the hillock on the other side, wandering then through a graveyard light fallign through a maze of skeletons trees and they, with their white bags and their fortune, seen from above, did pass wearily now through this second forest hallway, in fits and starts, and a blue glow could be seen accumulating on the panorama and the forest grew suddenly cold with wind and the terra firma slanted upward and the men scrambled through the dark and the wet and the slick sheen of rain sprent rocks and, tottering down the counter slope, they could see the car parked there at the treeline. They descended in sessions. Observing. No one was about. The car sat still in the moonlight. A trill of cicadas and crickets that ran in vibratory shudders up the men's backs, and they passed down wearily, like savages moving through time and forms, into the grass and the gravel lot and their shadowy forms crunched along and moved like rags across the lot, and Drano unlocked the car and Waffle slipped around the side with his bag and got in and Drano after him, scanning first the horizon over the hood of the car before dropping into the seat. They sat listening and breathing, door half open. He swung the door shut a moment late, and they sat in the dark of the car approximating their take by feel and weight. Eyeing the jewelry. Waiting for sirens. Drano unlocked the dash and took an orange prescription bottle from it, and it held only some twenty some pills now, and he took three and swallowed them with a flat soda from the center console into which codeine syrup had been earlier poured with the utmost care and gratification. They sat in the car, still adrenal and serious, listening for police and watching for lights. Nothing yet. Moonlight through the windscreen the color of a glistening salmon's white belly. Drano shifted around in his seat and pulled the small flip phone free from where he had stowed it beneath the seat, and it shew some six missed calls from Ahab. His giddiness vanished at once and it seemed all the terror of the world now crept upon his shoulder from behind, and he opened the phone and it rang and he looked vacantly out of the windshield into this dark unfamiliar tattered scenery at the fluttering cones of cypress and pure black of the forest beyond and he thought himself literally haunted and he was going cold and Ahab answered and spoke harshly to him, Waffle looking across the dark of the car at the soft glow of the chattering phone.

Nigga, you said you was leaving because you was flocking. You ain't say you kilt yo mama and baby mama and take off with yo son you weird ass nigga, the fuck you kill your mama for.

Nigga, shut the fuck up. Stop playing with me nigga.

Nigga. Police came to my house. My house, nigga. We just talked about this, nigga.

What they say? There was a lamppole in the distance across the street and it kept dying and sputtering back to life.

Nigga, they said you had called your baby mama and went over and slammed her ass and used the same gun on your mama. That you maybe had someone else with you. That you took your son.

Ahab. Nigga. They both dead?

Yeah, nigga. Shot.

You fucking with me, nigga.

On God, nigga. Twelve just left.
What the fuck, nigga. Where's Panda?
Police said you probably left with him. That's why they come here.
Nigga, where is Panda.
He ain't with you?
He ain't with me, on God, Ahab.
You ain't kill them?
No, nigga, on my mama, on God. They both dead?
Yeah.
Nigga, I'm in Kentucky or some shit. When did this shit happen?
Last night. Yo niggas got booked, too. Tonto and Slime.
That's why I left. Nigga, are they really dead? My fucking mama?
They dead.
Where you tell em I'm at?
I said I ain't know.
On God.
Yeah. On God.
You ain't give em this number right?
Nah, nigga. This ain't even my real phone. Who else you give this to?
Slime, maybe Tonto, but that nigga is gay as fuck. And there ain't no chance these niggas memorized that shit before they got locked up.
The line was silent. Drano spoke.
Ahab. They both dead?
Yeah. They dead.
Well. Where Panda at nigga? Where the fuck is Panda at?
What followed was not so much a close of a conversation as a constricting of Drano's perceptual faculties altogether into a single needle of visible spectrum and he hung stunned in the black there straining at the image, and, falling further back into darkness, something once stable seemed to fracture within him though it have no bone or organ or sinew to which it correspond and it somewhere in his middle and he thought again of Panda and Waffle was inside the needle of light saying something mutely with his mouth and putting his hands across and querying and the world rushed in at all sides through the windows and the darkness of the collision was such that it was as if Drano was blinded in that moment by a the staggering violet light of silence itself, and such horror was upon him that his movements were rendered wooden and dislocate and when he spoke he spoke robotically and his voice was further down from where he drifted in the black above and muffled, and he said my mama is dead and my baby mama is dead and my son is missing and these niggas think I'm the one who did it, and Waffle's face in the wheeling needle of vision clouded and then he laughed weirdly and his face clouded again and he looked Drano in the eyes and saw the lower lids glimmering in the moonlight with subdued tear and he understood the stakes at once and they drove in silence to swap out the car. The cash suddenly useless upon their laps like some monkey's hand having already exacted itself upon them. As if it had been waiting for them. He thought of the cell and as he began to drive away, he thought of death again and understood that it would be in death alone that they would take him, if they were

to take him at all. Panda's face hung in his mind like a living christmas ornament, small black child in skeleton pajamas dancing in neon ferity in the dark, giggling crazily. They drove in silence and Drano held his pistol in his lap the whole time and Waffle noted this, but said nothing and Drano drove and smoked and the wind fluttered his vaporous breath like a million lost kerchiefs out of the cracked window, and he sipped from his cup and looked deeply and earnestly into the heart of his life and his death and he endured all of its associate agony, driving still faced through the still wet and alien suburban Kentucky streets. And the man sat receiving a flood of text messages on his bedside table, many of which were harsh and murderous, and others which informed him of Drano's flight east, of which he had not known, and his life now having a point seemed to drift compass like in this direction and he began packing his belongings, the child still in the cage downstairs with the subject.

XXIV

Ruggles slanted through the moonlight, gliding and checking across the rippling empurpled lunar effulgence and fog, poncho about him like a cape and drifting backlit and rippling through the fog, as he moved along the streets. Wayne at his side in a beige plaid rain jacket with a red plaid wool lining. The earth had shifted again some days before and Wayne had scoffed at Ruggle's unfamiliarity as before, and only three days after returning from the grocery store did they find the entire town evacuated with the exception, it seemed, of them, and various shadows they saw lurching along the highways into and out of other half shadows there and lumbering through the broken world. They did not know where everyone had been evacuated to, but neither man could leave the state as per his probation conditions, and the speed at which things unraveled was such that, without a phone, they were presumably left for dead.

Even with a phone it would have unraveled the same. Only the walkie talkie occasionally screamed to life with static and the arguing of two black men and occasionally an emergency vehicle patrolling. There were signs as they moved, left behind, through the vines and the fog, and as they pass along like water running to the lowest point. Wandering about like two souls in purgatory or the same soul cloven in search of some necromancing mender. The branches of the trees flit past in the misty light of a moon waxing gibbous and Wayne looked up at Ruggles as they walked and smiled with his child's face and they passed along, become and becoming, and Ruggles floated at the mast, considering that the boy has not been disturbed by anything save perhaps the rain since the collapse of society as he knew it. He had merely shrugged and laughed in his reception of most of the calamity, any clear new of which they had missed due to lacking television and a social circle and any allegiance to news, feeling only the earthquakes and laying about tediously spinning cones of cannabis and eating cereal from various bowled cookery in the blue light laughing. The world had ended and in ending, had left them. They wandered on. Wayne wanted shoes and they had trekked all day on foot to the neighboring town where there was a fairly pitiful mall. They entered the dark and cavernous place and they had a flashlight now and they wandered through echoing, and things raced to the side in the dark, or clung to ceiling, and they passed behind their wandering cone of light studying the store signs and various grades of retail destruction. Wayne tripped and the flashlight bounced away from his hand and Ruggles chased it and Wayne screamed in sincerity and was heard and seen scampering up off the floor wildly towards the hand holding the light, wretching drly and terrified and holding his arm aloft away from him. Ruggles trained the flashlight where he had fell and a bright green man

lay dead on the ground with a needle in his arm next to a stack of shoe boxes. There were a scatter of hypodermic needles around the man, and Ruggles now scanned the ground they walked for more of these. They seemed mostly concentrated about the man's dead person. His face was insane with emeral phosphorescence and his body was in advanced composition and the man's corpse was rank upon nearing, and maggots curled away from the strobe of the flashlight, small and evil, and the skin of the man's hypodermically dulcorated arm was bold green and taut, and flies flew about his moth generously in a frenetic crawl and vibration Wayne watched the pulsing remains. The man was rank but their checked passage through this retail hell had acclimated them to his odor in their approach. Ruggles slid the flashlight about the man still. They were both stunned by the color of the man. His pea green belly was half visible through a tear in his shirt and worms could be seen burrowing freely within and, standing there in silence, with the flashlight entrained upon the pulsing flesh, so plentiful were these creatures in the man's belly that the sound of their mixing and suction could be heard through the reeking green and molding integument of the man's stomach. Ruggles gagged. The smell had set upon them now and they backed away into the shoe store. He looked down at Wayne. Jester's dreadlocks. Noble small creature aggravated by death through the rank darkness. Holding his arm away from his like a filthy garment. They stood at the entrance of the store breathing and trained the flashlight down the length of the corridor. Clicking and shuffling could be heard at the end of the corridor. Ruggles shone the light from where the sound came and it passed along down the corridor like a dust-flecked echo, and the circle of light slid cleanly along, lassoing in yellow relief any dark thing. It glode along and down the wall to the center of the corridor. Something Ruggles could not make out, a display, or perhaps some seating arrangement, was covered in a black sheet just below the skylight. Ruggles stepped forward and shone the light directly on this cloaked mystery and a single red-lidded avian black eye did flick lightward his way and met his own eye and Ruggles startled, now seeing the dark birds there in horaltic pose as if conducting some kind of avian black mass, and Wayne did see now, as well, and he grabbed Ruggles arm with bony fingers and howled in disgust and a great shadowy commotion of flapping and black feathers and dark bird cries did commence and, appearing like something happening in reverse, did some twenty or more tremendous black vultures lift through the pale golden ring of light in frantic upward shuffle from the tile to perch along the coping of the domed ceiling, lifting one foot up and then the other and shuffling aside. They stood watching the birds encircled at the dome. The green dead man at their feet.

Get your shoes, Ruggles said.

Nigga, you ain't getting nothing?

Just get your shoes. We need to leave here. Take the torch.

Wayne took the flashlight in hand and Ruggles watched him pass into the dark of the shoe store like a man at the mouth of some enportaled cave, and his form appeared to shrink to invisibility at the back of the store. There was a door barely visible there to Ruggles and into this Wayne dropped into darkness and so, too, the strobe of light with him and Ruggles stood in grey darkness with the buzzards preening and watching him irritably. He looked to where they had stood before massed together with their wings aloft. Rats tumbled upon those grounds now from all sides like foul waters rushing in, chittering and squealing weirdly, and the ticking of their claws was such that Ruggles could feel it in its actual accumulate beneath the soles of his shoes

and nausea filled him and cold sparks alit his spine and he spat and looked again to the back of the store and the boy had not yet emerged. Shadows hung in grievous invisibility about the largely overturned store. There was rustling down the opposite corridor to the left and Ruggles spun around and, so black was that foul tunnel afore him that he could not make out objects further than a distance of ten feet, and he backed slowly into the store watching the darkness. The rustling commenced again, closer now, and Ruggles stared into the eigengrau and glanced over his shoulder and he called for Wayne. A slice of flourescent yellow cut at once from the back of the store upon Ruggles and he was seen then by Wayne in an attitude of momentary agony, eyes rolling about in derangement and vigilance. Wayne held the light on him as he approached like a police officer.

Get that thing off me.

Nigga, I'm just playing.

You get your shoes?

I sure did.

Okay. Let's go. This is a bad place.

Ruggles held his hand out and Wayne passed him the flashlight and carefully they tip-toed along now, hither and thither, as if through a series of wires criss-crossing, and Wayne held the shoebox close to his chest affectionately and possessively and he passed into and out of the same grey shadows and spots of chalk colored moonlight that Ruggles did and he gazed deep into each blackened store and rats were there viciously bundled about the entrance and these did meet his eyes without apprehension or fear and they bared their teeth and he spat at them and they carried on as before untroubled and he skipped along behind Ruggles and then came astride him, bouncing into view, and he told Ruggles that he did not like this place and Ruggles shook his head in agreement and they turned at the end of the corridor still chasing the quivering hoop of light. Their shadows cutting into orange alabaster circle elastically and frantic. The entrance was before them once again and they drifted liquidly towards the sliding glass doors and the glowing opaque fenestrated border, and they passed out of the mall into air and into moonlight, as if through some kind of vacuum and there they stood breathing in the parking lot, the wind as faint as ash blown upon their skin. Ruggles scanned the horizon and he could see small fires in the forest beyond their town and off their path. He looked down at Wayne.

You okay?

What choo mean?

You fell into a rotting corpse.

That nigga was sick. That nigga was like the swamp thing.

Have you seen a dead body before?

Nigga, I have made dead bodies before.

No you haven't.

I did shoot out a car once. At a house.

You're good?

Yeah, mane, I'm chilling. Chilling.

You like your shoes?

O, for sure, my nigga.

Good.

They started walking. It smelled of woodsmoke and gasoline. Fryer oil. Ruggles watched the boy as he plucked a shoe affectionately from the box and studied his take gleaming in the moonlight. He smiled at Ruggles and bounced along beside. See them, from a distance. From your campfire. Behold these two shadows dragging and miniscule across the horizon as if in discovery of time itself and the vaulted deep blue night sky rose up tremendously about their tiny forms like some evil wave, and it carried them forth over the lands and through trees, and fish were seen like spangled ushers curving through the water and flipping up and dancing and whapping about the cruvature of the crest with their vertical tails, and the men floated along together on these waters through paved streets and neighborhood cement lanes, and like living stones did it carry them dumbly through the evening back to Ruggle's house, and small dark birds could be seen above darting in formation, wings tucked, and bats looked tethered to any light in which they appeared, and the night was a distortion as if the very fundament of the earth was thought, and they passed through an archway of trees and vines and were carried further along, the bark drinking greedily in the soft light, and they followed the wheeling strobe of the flashlight out of the kudzu and bramble with hands outstretched like men shielding their eyes from the face of God.

The transvestite stood at the entrance to Ruggles neighborhood in a thousand gold petals. She waved them forth out of the hydrous dark like some kind of androgynous faith healer standing at the end of the known world. They drifted across the blacktop like suds or slime, and took up on the sidewalk beside her. She clicked her tongue and pointed at Wayne's box.

I see you went to the mall. That place is fucking gross.

Where's your car at, Candy?

It's outside, Ruggles.

What choo doing out here then?

What do you want me to do, sit in there staring at that blue light all day?

Why aint you driving?

I don't feel like clearing off the cardboard. I'm just bored. Ruggles. What did you think of the mall?

It was grim. Like a tabernacle of evil. Wayne got on the floor and hugged a dead green junkie.

Nigga, shut the fuck up.

The transvestite laughed and brought her arms up womanly like in excitement. Candy was her name. She enjoyed getting Wayne worked up like this, making him uncomfortable and with particular reference to her deviant sexuality and gendering. The three of them moved through the dark over the sidewalk like refugees or witnesses, and they went like drunken robbers down a grass slope, cutting through overgrown yards that leapt with crickets, and they switchbacked and followed a stone path and broke at length into the cul-de-sac at the end of Ruggles street in the cold shadow of a black walnut tree. Candy lit a cigarette and they bobbed together down the lane as if swept by wind along an icy coast and they gathered again in Ruggles backyard. Ruggles asked Candy for a cigarette and she produced one, and they stood smoking and Wayne went and sat on a bucket and studied his shoes again in the moonlight, running his dark hands over their fragrant curvature. Ruggles looked to Candy.

I think we need to take the car out tonight. The grocery store is done and there's not shit in the fridge.

That's why I was waiting for you, dummy.

Ruggles stood staring at the ground, smoking, thick blue vapour scuttling in orbs out of his mouth like crawling vines, and they could hear bullfrogs in the forest bleating like small wet accordions, and they could hear the singing of crickets, and there was a great shuffle overhead and they watched crows pass overhead, ignoring them altogether, swaying upward and tucking their wings and burrowing through the air over their heads out of sight. Ruggles told Wayne they had to get the carboard ready for the seats, because they were hunting the next grocery store and Wayne stood up and set his new shoes in the house and, little frolicking anti-nature creature, emerged with a dustpan and hand broom and flit across the yard like a small strange dog and went to the car and started dutifully sweeping glass away from the carboard seats that were set therein originally from the protection of glass on the seat below. They watched. Candy smiled at Ruggles. She told him to watch.

Wayne.

His head slipped out of the car and up like a squirrel.

Wayne, I heard you're gay. Everyone in jail was saying that you're gay.

Nigga, shut your bitch ass up you gay ass nigga. I ain't about your weird ass shit. Weird ass nigga.

Ruggles laughed. Candy was grinning, smoking. She looked like a wet flower made of felt.

Wayne, I'm just saying I heard that your cellie came onto you and you guys made a go of it.

I would have made a go of killing that dumb ass nigga.

She looked to Ruggles laughing. Straight people are so weird.

Why, Ruggles asked. Because he'd kill a man for trying to have sex with him?

Yes!

Well. What do you want him to do?

It's not that big of a deal.

Bitch are you crazy you are talking about a nigga getting raped, of course I'm killing shit.

Ruggles, you?

I'd be killing shit, yeah.

Candy laughed and rolled her eyes. Yeah, but for you guys it's the same if like a guy put his hand on your shoulder or something. You want to kill him.

Wayne looked up from the car nodding in agreement with her. Ruggles watched this and laughed.

Is that your position, too, Ruggles?

No. I'm just telling the guy to take it elsewhere. That it's not sweet with me like that.

She flicked the cigarette and it spun in the air over the red fence and the ember went scattering in diminishing circular orange pulses and the cigarette could be seen rolling slantwise down the blacktop into the pale stone crook between the lane and the slanted driveway. Bits of glass clattered down to the stone and tinked as Wayne worked, and a moment later he was standing beside the other two and telling them it was ready. They were swept again out of the backyard and woodenly they took up their carboard seats, and Candy backed the car out, and the windscreen smashed out was jarring to Ruggles and Wayne, and she drove and the night air blew against them so and a million infinitesmal shards of glass with it and the stars arranged above their route like ghostly pale white sentinels and Wayne smiled in the back and looked about them as they shuttled slowly down the highway in starts and checks, reversing where the road was blocked and cutting over the median and cutting back across. Candy was driving and Ruggles

was in the passenger seat. There was no longer industry so she could not get her hair facial hair lasered off, and she had run through the town's stock of estrogen already and had grown thinner and wearied and resembled a sort of deviant and felonious crossdressing boy. She drove chain smoking and crazed, the endless roadside emergency lights orange and wild on her eyes and the wind rushed in through the shattered windshield aperture like some kind of invisible demolition of the senses and Wayne was ducked down in the back, and she accelerated more and Ruggles tapped her arm and gestured for her to slow down and she decelerated and grinned at him and shifted upward again, laughing in the pandemonium, lights rushing in from all sides, orange and fire colored, and the wind screamed in through the dash and around their faces like a thousand clear birds and the moon was full and Ruggles bade her again slow down again and all was liquid and all was roar and baritone and clipped laughter and Ruggles closed his eyes and heard the car accelerate again, and, when he opened them again, Candy was looking at him smiling insanely as she collided with the front end of an upright concrete median barrier and her eyes were still on his as she was pulled suddenly sideward and limp through the windscreen into the outer dark and Ruggles and Wayne were sent hurtling forward into the extension of their seatbelts, glass from the seats and floor flying up in spectacular watery suspension about them like an invisibly armed chandelier, and, collapsing, the glass nicking their faces and arms and settling sharply on their laps. The horn was stuck on and Wayne was coughing in the backseat. Smoke coming out of the crumpled hood of the sedan and so crushed was the front of the car that Ruggles could extend his left arm from his seat through the windscreen and find his hand over pure roadway. Ruggles rolled out of the car coughing, as well, glass falling away. The world swayed upwards to almost tipping over and he tottered off the roadside and grasped the telephone pole, and Wayne was there, too, emerging, like a rabbit from a thicket, and the horn blared and Wayne came up and was yelling that they had to find Candy and Ruggles held one finger up to him, the earth spinning and groaning, and the horn sounded like some gigantic telephone left off of the hook and Ruggles gathered himself somewhat and took a few steps and wretched on the roadside and spat and stood up again and brushed at the glass spangling his jacket and pants and they stumbled together back into the cinnabar light of the roadway's spinning light, hacking and demented like two men escaped from hell. Candy was not in sight. They looked directly in front of the car and she was not there and Ruggles brought his face close to Wayne's ear and asked if he could get the horn to shut off and Wayne shrugged and held his hands up weakly and coughed and they walked further and she was not on the roadway.

It was Wayne who came upon her crumpled and decollated form. He slid down in the bank beside the roadway to the gold sequin dress ther and taking it by the shoulders he lift her small form towards his own and he was asking her if all gay niggas drive like that when her headless form regarded him, blood gushing out of the craggy network of bone and ventricle and sinew. Wayne shrieked and dropped her and scrambled backwards on the seat of his pants away on the slope. Ruggles watched as if in slow motion as her headless form fell indifferently and staggering into the wet leaves, black lit from behind, sliding further down the slope heavily and weirdly flipping in dead indifference. Wayne sat stunned in the leaves. Ruggles thought they had to locate the head for some reason, and then he realized there was no reason, and he sidestepped down the bank to Wayne and held out his hand and a pale palm came darting up into his, rough and small, and he lift the boy from the slope and pulled him upon the grassy plateau that ran

along the roadside. They were some thirty paces from the car. The horn shrieked and their heads throbbed and Ruggles and Wayne followed the grass, and they did come upon her inanimate head glowing there like some huge and terrifying opal of death and one could see where her jaw had been stove in against the wheel on her flight outward and where the pavement had skinned the left side of her sliding and still animate head, taking all the hair, including her left eyebrow, to the very gleaming bone and they stood there looking upon what was Candy's living head in a sort of stupor. Neither man spoke. Copper colored light swirled at their back like the last terrifying and confused thoughts of a poisoned grey brain. Ruggles flicked his chin and they started walking under this vast cathedral of stars away from the dislocate head, and they passed under the streetlight along the roadside. Orange lights dotting the evacuation route, spinning in orange cast thick plastic globes like fire. They walked in silence. The horn was faint now at their back and Wayne was slapping at glass fragments that had met his forehead and the back of his neck splintering and nearly invisible. They walked along, the city falling away at their back like some monstrous thing receding greedily backwards into the dark of its cave. Ruggles looked to Wayne.

Are you okay?

Nigga, I got glass, like, nigga, embedded up in my dreads, nigga, I can't stand it. It's, like, between them or some shit.

Wayne. Stop.

They stopped. The horn was so faint in the background as to be an abstraction. The men looked digital and apparitional, glass flecked and scintillating in the warping cream colored moonlight.

Wayne. Are you okay?

A nigga got glass all up in his shit.

What the fuck just happened, Wayne.

Wayne was silent. Ruggles was silent. They stood spanseled with glass shards in the moonlight on the road's side listening to the insects and the wind and the faint blaring of the car's horn at their back. Wayne toed the grass between them.

Ruggles. You think. You think her head was still. Still thinking when it slid like that on the road? I mean, the nigga's ear was gone, Ruggles.

Ruggles gripped his chin and stared as if filled with nothing but horror and as if constituted by nothing but horror and his dark eyes bore through the night like two black wolves loosed at the foot of some snarling dragon. I don't know. Maybe.

What choo mean, maybe?

I mean, I've read that your head stays alive for some eighteen seconds or so when you're decapitated.

What you said?

When your head is cut off. I guess, ripped off here.

You think she felt it, Ruggles?

I don't know. I think your perception goes out entirely the moment of impact. She probably got knocked out immediately.

But a nigga might wake up immediately if his head was skidding down a fucking road without no body on it.

I don't know.

They stood there. Ruggles spat and leant over and picked up a stick that lain beside the road. It came just above his waist and he held it and looked to the clockstar, the watery night receding away beneathing his eyeline. A firefly pulsed before him. Two. He started walking, hiking with the stick, and Wayne looked at it as if he might need one as well for himself and Ruggles watched as he scanned the ground for another and scampered off into the dark and the black empty handed, and, finally coming upon something similar, he took up walking likewise beside Ruggles and alternately lifted it and broke away spare twigs and suchforth. Ruggles looked over at Wayne.

I don't know if we should be crying, or what. Or report this.

Nigga. Who we going to report it to?

I don't know. Is there really no one, Wayne?

I seen a cop one time and I hid.

Ruggles spat and they walked on. He looked to Wayne.

Where do you think that shit goes?

What, Wayne asked.

Like, just seeing Candy's head like that. It's not good. And now we're just walking.

What you said, eighteen seconds, Ruggles?

Ruggles paused. He bade Wayne to his side and the men fell to their knees at the roadside there in the cool grass and the wet leaves, and with heads lowered they did begin to pray, lightning orbing and stroboscopic up on the horizon. They prayed the relief of Candy's spirit and prayed that she was spared suffering during her final moments, and each man prayed this in particular as if he a special need to express that he felt this sentiment to God, as what she had endured could not be changed, and so this prayer seemed the more some solidifying of their position on the matter within themselves as God listened and it was as if they were underwater there, tumbling blind and concussed through the venom black night, and the moon waxed mighty above them, and far back it shone terrifically in the opened eye of Candy, puddling like water there and sleeking down like mercury and making gleam the raw exposed bone of her skull above where her ear and cheek had been shorn from her face and the horn blared some ways off like a digital elephant in a kind of endless agony and she could not hear it and the sun had barely risen the next morning when upon her head a great black vulture did feed objectively, holding it's tattered wings of black velvet aloft and warming.

XXIV

The man had drilled two more holes into the woman's head and, against all his expectations, she remained alive, though the range of her activity diminished greatly, and she spent most of her time standing up and down and looking about her as if just having materialized there in the bloodsmeared room. The man had drilled the second set of holes from the side, so that they would intersect with two of the four initial holes he had drilled into her forehead and, while she was half etherised and seizing in his grip, he did lean down and peer through both sides and scream at his capacity into her actual ringing brain matter and the woman arched weirdly, bound to a chair, and the man walked to the front of her, and she was conscious now, yammering in a sort of rushed conversational tone of gibberish, the man did lean in and put his mouth directly

over two of the holes in her forehead and scream again at the limit of his strength and his voice was heard grotesque and filtered out of the holes in the side of her head. The woman's eyes crossed and she bucked in the chair and went entirely slack, drooling and urinating, her eyes lolling in the candle lit temple. The boy was in his cage in the corner, naked and observing. He had one hand in his mouth. The snake was inside the cage with him, slithering about the boy's feet and forking its tongue out possessively at him and glaring and blinking sideward and snapping, and he stood there with a hand on the bar like a small chimpanzee in his nakedness, watching the man work upon the woman.

The boy was hardly above four years and little could he comprehend of the man's words but his demonstrated commands. The man had earlier that day given him a bag of cookies and a bottle of milk at the same time he allowed the snake free roam of the cage, and the boy moaned in fear and pushed crying from the creature, and after so long having ate the snack, he sat dull and sedate as the glittering black serpent looked him over aggressively, hissing in his face and swarming about his form like a weightless metal. The man stood outside of the cage in his leather overalls comforting the boy, telling him that he was doing a great job. That he was a good boy. That he found him in the wilderness. The boy sat chewing and the snake darted across and bit his hand and blood ran from it at once and the boy continued to chew and looked at the injured hand as if a droplet of water might have fallen from the sky upon it and back to the cookies. The man knew the pills were working for his size. The woman started yammering in a panicked and rushed tone from the chair, and the boy watched as the man walked over and hit her so hard across the face that he did see blood and teeth both fly away toward the bare stone and quiver lit walls and clatter twinkling and bloody on the ground there. The man went to the cage again and the small naked black boy regarded him seriously and the man told the boy that he found him in the wilderness after Jesus hurt his mother. The woman was gargling out exigent sounding nonsense, her hindbrain alone now driving her animate form. He let the boy and the snake out of the cage into the red flourescence and the quivering candlelight, and the boy tottered around weirdly and the man stroked his head and knelt down and kissed him and told him he was doing a good job, and the man unbound the woman and she came to standing and stumbling around the temple as the man lay on the floor writhing next to the boy, holding his hand and moaning and gyrating against the floor as the woman took up her habitual sitting down and standing up. She began moaning likewise out of pure echopraxic discovery and the man stood from the floor infuriated in offense and, screaming, he attempted to put his fingers into the raw apertures of her skull that he had bore, and when he could not do this he lowered the woman with the whole of his palm by her face to the floor and she sat there drooling and ranting. The man went to the boy and told him suddenly in a booming voice that the man who masters the material world is a man who forsakes the group. The notion of groups entirely. Even the family. For the group has a spirit of its own. One that is often quite cruel to actual living souls of the members of the group found at some point or other to be unfit on account of the vagaries of the blind man's existence and shifting values and so forth. A man cannot master the material world while he labors with and with regard for the group whose spirit might so shift, under any set of different circumstances, to command the man's ruin or death. A man cannot be a member of a group because he willingly submits his own spirit as subject, submissive to the larger spirit of the group. Even a friend group. A career. A country. A man must stand alone lest his soul be

submissive to some larger entity and the fortunes associate with that entity. Your fortune must be your own and that your fates be aligned with no other's is axiomatic to the man with a mastery of the material world. The boy stood dumb blinking and watching the man talk. He did not understand if he was at some kind of school. The man looked the boy over and sighed, for his nigger blood would always wrestle with his lessons, and he took the boy up from the floor and took the woman and brought them to buckling before him. Or some approximate of it. And the boy took up with the activity after sometime as if of his own volition and the woman lay splayed and senseless, the man ranting insanely and moaning over the scene, spending himself and screaming with his hand against the cold stone wall. The boy was in weird repetitive spasm over the woman and the snake slid on a sudden over and pushed the boy off possessively and effectively, and the boy stood to the side with his thumb in the mouth watching the black serpent run the length of the prostrate woman. And across her still yammering face did it slither and turn and rend her at the forehead. And again it dashed in like a spurt of dark blood and took her by the nose and the boy laughed, his whole hand in his mouth now. The man watched him in the flickering candlelight. And like some dark flower suddenly blooming within the black petaled garden of the man's mind he did lunge to the ground and begin to manually strangle the retarded woman. The boy watched her pale naked legs scramble senselessly against the stone floor to bloody chafing. He did not know if he was at school. The man screamed as he slew her so and the boy sucked his thumb, his eyes rolling about the bloodsmeared stone walls, and the snake attended the man's actions with great favour and disposed as such it glanced at the boy, as if smiling in satisfaction and the boy smile back at the serpent. The man stood from his act sweating and panting and his master bade him leave that very night to find the nigger and that even were all the world to fall away in crumbling magnificence through the cosmos as he pursue him still he would remain in ultimate alignment with the negro as they hurtle through the outer reaches of space. The man dragged the dead woman across the rough stone floor toward the child. He spoke as he laboured, glistening with sweat in the wild orange red light. The boy was watching him.

See now, my reward, and hearken. For there are two wills in this world, and all things and creatures are but variously colored and patterned balloons conveying one of two of these wills and this alone. The phenomenological sensation of uniqueness or individuation is necessary for any vessel carrying either one of these wills.

The boy put his hand in his mouth and watched the man.

All the world that is, even words, are but variously shaped and variegated balloons inflated with one of two gases, corresponding to these wills. There is the primary will. That is, a will that concerns itself with the materials of the earth already in existence, human and otherwise. This will is concerned with the taxonomy, collection, organizations, trade, and maintenance of these materials. That is, in essence, their perpetuity. And there is a second will. This second will is concerned with things not yet in existence, be they material or not, and it wills them forth into form. Into balloon form. For even words are balloons carrying one of two wills, however distinct the external design. Truths, too. And tell me, my reward, if you are of the opinion that these two wills should be in alliance with one another? My reward, the consideration that they are distinct ought to be sufficient in reassuring one of the contrary. For things in true alliance are bound. That is, these wills are necessarily adversarial. This first will seeks to devour the second one, for this

first will, the primary will, sees to the provision and careful management of what is in existence. And particularly that which is in contribution to it. And the introduction of that which is not, from this second will, and that which was not, or is not now here, naturally in existence, is always necessarily a threat to this first will because this first will is driven by the reality of a scarcity of resources. A man could enterprise until the end of the earth and never come upon this. That he is mere balloon of one of two wills.

The boy said balloon and the man nodded.

He wrangled the snake and guided the boy by the small of the back into the cage and closed it and the boy took up his drowsy watch through the rusted steel gate as the woman's body slid out of the room, her head sideways and looking in his direction as she slither along out of sight propelled by forces unseen. The man returned and he wheeled in an orange steel dolly whose symmetry and cleanliness was discordant with the enormous gore of the temple and he wheeled it towards the cage and let the steel sheet slide under the large portable kennel's underside, and he tipped the boy and snake back in a disgusting clatter against at the front bars, the snake hissing and twisting across the length of the boy. Certain and unafraid of him. The man lugged the cage up the basement stairs in heaving hefts, and the boy was conveyed to the garage into the back of the van. The man shut him in and he sat for some time in pure black with the snake moving about at his legs hissing, and he held the bars of the cage and stared at a single point of light where the moon had stolen in through a crease in the blinds, and the boy stared at this spot as if the Angel of God stood there and he sat down in the dark and the snake purred and slithered about him, constricting and releasing, snapping blindly like a jet across the cage over the boy's shoulder. Nipping at the bars. The man entered the garage sometime later. The back door opened and the man put two large briefcases in the back and the boy watched and the snake scribbled toward the light hissing as the man got into the front seat. He was wearing the suit again and holding the nigger's phone. Soft white glow on his wormy face. Bespectacled and quadrupling images blue and white. He sat reading in the dark of the car, verifying his translations. Messages appearing on the phone indicated that the nigger had fled east. And so the man would follow and in the passenger seat sat a man of chalk pallor and croaking voice with glowing eyes hidden awawy in a red cloak handknit a thousand years ago by a squadron of medieval tailor women with braids wearing cottes and form fitting bliauts, and he will not speak though he will navigate, and the man is instructed not to regard him, and the man is sweating, and his master in the cloak sweeps from the passenger seat into the dark of the back and he does not come out for some time, and the boy was changed then ultimately, and the man drove along as if in a religious ecstasy, as if whatever direction he drove, he drove upon a scroll that unfurled ultimately to the person of the nigger. For there were two wills in the world, his master had taught him, and this nigger was of the second will. And the man, who understood himself through election as the primary agent and overriding personification of this first will believed that all the material earth and galaxy might coalesce so as to maintain him and guide him along, as it had his master, to slay the nigger responsible for the desecration. A room of diamonds it might prepare for him, even, scooped out of the central stone of the earth. Milk and honey and locust in abundance. There are two wills in the world, and all creatures and objects are but variously shaped and coloured balloons carrying one of two wills. And this first will is mighty, for it is the fundament of the living universe and it is not an exaggeration to say that almost all visible life is but a

masked ball of this first will into which this second will has snuck without reverence nor regard. And I speak to you as your master, and in no way condescendingly, for I am proud to have my own master. He is a man the world enfolded in lotus petals and gold. He's lived a thousand lives. But I speak to you as your master and tell you that we attend this very masked ball now, in this moment. And my master has bade me seek out one attendant, one nigger attendant, who appears to have stolen in at some unseen moment, or perhaps discarded his service clothes for those of a glorious costume, and remove him from this ball.

XV

Drano was sweating, drenched and shaking in the dark room. The walls were grey slate and where they were not the paint was peeled away in wide swaths and bare dark stone stood behind. The bones in his legs were thrumming and he stretched them and kicked in repetition and the room seemed to throb towards him. He was able to get Percocet on the mainline, everyday. It was five times the street price and he paid it. They put him in the room three days before, after he was accused of provoking a prison riot. There were only six cells in this module. It was subterranean and there were no windows and the lighting was so spare as to render everything grey and there was a sign on the outer door that said Danger: Aggressive Inmates. He spent the first two days in agonizing withdrawal. He would not admit it to the Latinos in the cell next to him, who spoke rapidly and aggressively and their words were all charged with the potential for violence. All of them. Speaking with them was like dancing on an ocean of animate blades that at any moment might give to gouging, and you could not choose to ignore them, or the violence was certain then. They had one hour each day to stand in a cage from which neither sun, nor horizon, nor moon could be seen but instead the same grays and maroons of the wall and the prison beyond. They would sit together once a week in a small room with a television at the end of the hallway and each man did sit inclined to or prepared for violence at any moment. Drano understood that these people were different from him and he felt sickened by their voices. Muscles spasmed throughout his person and he would wash suddenly hot and then just as suddenly shift to shivering cold in no discernible sequence. But what whelmed the very heart of his person more than any one of the various unpleasant bodily ailments with which he was now afflicted in withdrawal was the dark bird rising up in his mind like a poison wave that rendered all his thoughts from a new vantage that was distorted and dark, and he regarded himself, and all of his deeds, with repugnance from this place as similarly hideous, and the bed frame was so small in the room that his dusty ankles and feet hung clear of the end and the mat flapped weirdly down where the frame ended prematurely. Drano could not stop changing positions and he could not stop sweating and neither changing positions nor sweating seemed to be doing anything perceptible to ease the overlapping agonies within his form and mind. He wretched and the room swum in from five angles and he was encased in cold stone from all sides save the mat beneath him, and so close was the wall that his eyeball could near touch the dark limestone. Tears were in Drano's eyes. Something in the middle of his chest that was neither organ nor sinewy nor bone felt as if it might burst. What vessel this was and what it contained and what the implications of that might be he could not know. Nor could he move. The cell had shrunken so as to entomb him to near smashing. Nor could he call out. For the ceiling had sunken so as to bury his head sideward into the bed and at the opposing wall there at his eyeball and his words could

not escape for there simply was not enough room for any other thing inside of this stone box. Drano thought of his son and how he had failed him and that his son would likely lay compacted in filthy cold stone one day as a result of his absences and this thing inside him felt to bursting and he snuffed through his nose deeply to center himself and the man in the neighboring cell could be heard bading him again to conversation. Drano was the newest inmate on the six man module and his afflicted reticence was generally being taken for an aloof or superior self regard. He understood this was happening and simply did not have the strength to partake in the mechanical dance necessary to dulcorate these men's thirst for slights or perceived instances of disrespect. They respecting nothing and no one. He lay sweating. It smelled of piss and of other men. The cell's eastern wall had slanted in its entirety removing some one third of the cell's area and it would remain so for the duration of his stay. He continue thrashing in the wet sheet and he could see fragments of calcite sparkle in the weak jaundiced light and the darkness of the module was overwhelming, for it was moreso penumbra than it was tangible reference. Drano could hear from his agony the man next door clicking his comb against the bars at their joined wall asking him what his fucking problem was and if he thought he was better than the other man. The man called him a junkie and he did not care. He did not care if the man killed him, the room was so small and so afflicted was he with excruciating torment in both mind and body. Drano saw his entire life as a sort of horrid jaunt through a field of sin and he thought God would send him to hell no matter what now, considering how much he had stolen. Fortunes he had carried away. Now he was in this cell underneath the county jail, surrounded by literal murderers. Men who shot or stabbed strangers for money and did not think twice about this line of work. There was an Asian man in the cell across from him who was small and catlike and tattooed in intricate patterns about the neck and the head. The man seemed to move along a horizontal plane alone. Drano could see him at the bars of the cell and the man's slant eyes met Drano's in bed and he smiled and his teeth were huge and stained like wood and Drano looked away and a black Goat regarded him beside the bunk saying, Your mother seems to have transferred inside of the horse. The horse has many ventricles. Many ventricles, and it is an exceedingly difficult creature. The goat's eyes were like sovereign yellow scarabs on the side of creature's narrow black face and Drano woke in the motel, his left arm tingling and his heart, it seemed, beating horizontally at capacity. As if from side to side. Several times he opened and closed his eyes to reassure himself he was in a motel and not the room.

The carpet was red and there was a single wood laminate dresser. A television. Two queen beds, and a table with a two chairs. The room smelled faintly of cigarettes. Grey light made its dawn ingress at the borders of the curtain, though thickly they blacked out much of the window. Drano lay on his side staring at the blackmost spot on the curtain. He could see Waffle sleeping in the next bed and he could see the red numbers of the clock, and he gaze into the absolute blackness and tried to will something forth to reassure him and he willed with all of his invisible self for some relief from this spot of darkness, and he rolled on his back and watched the ceiling and he was determining whether or not to pour a line of juice, or if he could go back to sleep of his own will, but he thought of dreaming again and lay watching the colors change at the perimeter of the curtain from grey to white to yellow, and finally the curtain was alit, a maroon with quatrefoil golden stitching.

They were passing through Memphis. Ahab was connecting Drano with a dealer he knew there. Drano stared at the curtain. A quaking took up and he did watch as Waffle's bed rose from the buckling foundation and as Waffle awoke protesting his arrest in the roar and it went on, and Drano held his bed in a crucifix formation as it rocked near the fracture, and Waffle looked like a man stranded on some wave slapped rock in the middle of the freezing sea, and the roaring was such that they nearly loosed their respective grips to hold their ears, but for the fear of being thrown from the bed into the grinding rock schism itself. The eggshell popcorn ceiling began falling in huge powdery shards from above and collapsing down on the men and powdering them in a panicked clown's aspect, and already it is done. Only a deep grinding from the center of the earth could be heard to endure, and Waffle's side and bed remained slanted upward, repositioned by the quake. The motel's alarm was now blaring and Drano asked Waffle if he was okay and Waffle said, what, and Drano just shook his head, and they shrugged in the whining alarm and dressed in the jaundiced grey light and noise and they packed their leather cases and compulsively thumbed their cash quickly and returned it to their person, and, as the earth still cried out in deep yaws of grinding stone, they moved soundlessly through the morning light into the parking lot into the Rolls Royce. It seemed to Drano and Waffle that sometime during their flight that law and order and society as they understood it had come undone in some critical capacity. They were still paying at most places, but not all, including hotels, and when they followed the highway, upon reaching certain state lines, Drano and Waffle had been met with large orange signs saying closed and do not enter, and the men had moved these aside in the late of the night and driven on.

They moved through the Memphis morning and through the sunlight like blades through water, and cherry blossoms lined the road they now slid down, petals twirling as they whipped by all pale pink and blood clotted through the slow marmalade colored sunlight, and Drano did watch the southern skies through the windshied the color of blue denim with only but a few ragged cotton colored clouds drifting about the heavens, and Drano triangulated with the party. Ahab had aligned them to meet a gas station and had given Drano an address and time. They pulled into the parking lot wearily. The gas station appeared to be functioning, whether in its intended and legal capacity, however, was not certain. They pulled into the parking lot. The men they met were not friendly and they were clad in black and camoflauge garments almost entirely, and they brandished their guns very openly, outside and inside the gas station, and spoke of death without any gravity whatever, and the men followed them to a house. There was one among them with whom Drano spoke at the gas station, a leader of sorts. Koala. He was pale skinned almost to the shade of a caucosoid and he resembled a frog and he had pale green wide set eyes and he was hostile from their first interaction in the gas station parking lot to an extent where both men held their hands near their guns as if the other might begin firing at any moment, and Drano followed the two cars, talking to Waffle, smoking and rubbing his chin. They had driven thirty miles of highway out of their way into Arkansas, where they stole this luxury vehicle from a lot and changed the plates and drove the thirty miles again to resume their route to Memphis. Drano assumed there would be a federal alert in association with his former vehicle. One of the men in the car in front of them turned around his eyes vacant black eyes leered back at them in observation. Waffle was smoking what looked like a burnt brown gourd filled with marijuana and the smoke rolled like real fog through the car, bulbous in the spring sunlight, and then

snatched out the windows cracked in the back. Rushing backwards and not yet inaugurated into the canon of anonymous solution and death. Drano sipped from his styrofoam cup. Waffle was watching him. Drano knew it and looked at him. Waffle spoke.
What, nigga, you nervous?
These niggas know we got serious money on us.
This Ahab's nigga, though, right?
I don't know. I don't care. I don't know him. I don't know why he's got, like, ten niggas with automatics with him.
Ahab shrugged and smoked.
Nigga, I'm serious.
You're geeking, nigga. You been sipping since like 6AM.
Drano wiped his brow and he rolled down the window and spat into the wind and watched the car in front of him as if the blurred images of the backs of these men's heads might relay something essential to confirm or refute his concerns and another one of the men at a stop light did turn around and look at him and their eyes met, and they followed them through the Tennessee afternoon. The sun perfect and circular. The light like weightless diamonds through the breeze. They passed along with the windows partly open and the air smelled of sumac and sassafras, and they passed down of lane of box elders and Drano could smell the men in the car at their fore were smoking cannabis now, as well, for Waffle had tipped his blunt out of the window and the smell came curling back somehow menacingly to them, and they followed the car into a group of nondescript looking tan stucco and brick apartments, and they followed Koala up a set of open-air stairs that led directly into an apartment with nothing whatever on the walls. Women sat in their underwear, three of them, scooping powder into small bags, and the men with the guns crowded in after Drano and Waffle and stood around the couches silently regarding the two men, and Koala told Drano and Waffle to wait and they sat waiting on a couch that looked like it had been taken off a curb and a dog locked in one of the rooms barked so insanely the entire time almost nothing else could be heard, and no one spoke in the room whatever, no pleasantries between these men. Though dozens of eyes slid about and exchanged in silence with what they beheld, and the television played soap operas at an almost imperceptible volume though the women seemed to be half attending the plot in spite of this and the dog's gnashing and howling. They sat on this sad trap house sofa, and Drano could feel the warm polymers of his gun sweating against his right hip and he had the cash in a small leather designer shaving case at his feet, and he brought it up and unzipped it and put it on the table, and Koala came from the back bedroom with a bag of bottles and Drano's face lit up and the man sat them down on the chipped wooden coffee table and Drano pulled the bag his way and glimpsed inward and found the essential confirmation that he was looking for, in one direction or the other, insofar as the risk and the wisdom of this transaction was concerned, was there in the form of ten unsealed pint bottles of Wockhart and an orange translucent bottle of pills dubious alone by nature of their association with these unsealed vessels, and he looked up at the man.
They ain't sealed.
Nah. It's all good homie. They good. Is that the bread?
One of the younger blacks with an automatic swept in like some kind of teleporting goblin and secured Drano's cash out of sight. Koala was already charging Drano a tax for being an out of

towner and there was some thirty thousand dollars in that bag, and Drano filled with a sort of poisonous lava and he met Koala's eyes.
My nigga, they come sealed. Your shorty just walked off with the cash, bro. That shit's weird to me, bro. Like it's weird to me.
Nigga, I just gave you your shit. Koala was already raising his voice. The fuck you think he took the money for?
Alright, nigga. Look. I'm a try one and if it's good we straight. If it's not, then the deal's off.
We already made the deal nigga.
Nigga, this is a lot of juice. I'm tasting it. That's like thirty grand.
Taste it then, you weird ass nigga. Koala affected a casual manner.
Waffle was sweating.
Drano took a pint at random. He spun the lid off and immediately could tell that the contents were either adulterated or altogether something else and something invisible in him sunk as if his soul was ligatured to a million meteroids flying downward through the darkness in their gnarled calcification. He sipped and he could taste corn syrup and some unrecognizable mix of cough syrup and perhaps grape juice and Drano did not show this on his face. He understood that any sort of armed pursuit of his cash would be a crash out, and that he would either die or be killed or be hurt to such an extent as to either demand hospitalization or render him unable to flee law enforcement. Koala looked at him, smirking arrogantly, pale cruel creature with emerald eyes, like some evil frog that played upon his heart's very wishes, disappearing into the fog beneath a bridge. Drano regarded him back blankly.
You drink lean, bro?
I'm sipping right now, my nigga. The man brought up a cup from his feet. The ice clinked. It was white styrofoam and there was a clean white outline of sweating condensation gathered on the sides about the remainign liquid. It was hot and the room smelled of boiled vinegar as a woman was now at the stove clinking about, and the men set there, everyone's experience of time becoming something negotiable and relative and Drano asked Koala if he wanted to pour up right now with this, and the man refused. He queried those dark footsoldiers lined behind Koala like statues of oak and metal.
Any you niggas want to pour up? It's on me, nigga.
Frog held a hand up to these men, indicating that he would answer for them.
They good. They on the job.
Drano looked around. He was fuming. He didn't care. He wanted to crash out on the man and be killed by one of his anonymous camoflauge clad shooters and that would be the end of it. No more room. No testing juice. No withdrawals.
Come on, niggas. He swung his huge head around in mock generosity. Grab a cup, nigga!
Frog told him to leave.
Why, nigga? I thought we was chilling. I'm chilling, man.
We got business to do. We ain't into hosting new niggas all day.
Waffle stood up and Drano waved blindly at him and grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him back down beside him.
Why you got so many niggas with guns on us, homie?
These my shorties. My niggas.

Okay, and they draw on every nigga that comes through here the same way they been with us?
The woman looked over from the stove.
Nigga, take your shit and get the fuck out of here, Koala said.
Yeah, nigga, you said it.
Drano took the bag and stood up from the couch and he held it up to this wooden assembly of death's machinery, smiling hugely at the murderous teenagers, almost all of them still at this point having no indication that Drano knew the juice was fake and that he was not being taken by silent show. Koala was walking behind him, scratching his chin, his green eyes scrunched in speculation.
Said what? He asked.
Shit.
What?
You said take your shit. That's what in those bottles, nigga. Shit.
They were in daylight now, on the open air stairs in descent with Koala at the rear. Only two of the boys had taken up at the top of the stairs to supervise the departure. Koala knew that Drano was furious and aware of the robbery and still he felt this man was not a threat to him, and he walked him down the stairs and they switchbacked to where they had parked the cars and at the very instant that they were out of sight of the man's young killers, Drano withdrew his pistol and shot the man in the shoulder. Everything was silent. He shot him twice there, so light was the FN's trigger, and the man's shoulder simply exploded in dark blackening blood, as if it held some huge sick heart there in secret, and blood sprung from it in unbelievable blossom onto the pavement and the man's shoulder was simply gone. Blood and bone could be seen but nothing attached the man's shoulder to his limb. In the traditional sense. Rather, it hung by the integument of the man's torso and the underlining of the arm pit. And the man was lucky, for Drano should have killed him. For there were men, boys, in every city, many of them, who would kill for less than a quarter of that take and a few of them not coincidently under the employ of Koala. The man tried to draw his gun with his off hand and Waffle swept in and knocked him unconscious with the front of his pistol and he went limp to the floor in front an apartment door and they heard urgent scuffling down the stairs at their backs and they hurtled to the car and threw themselves ducked into it their seats, and Drano had the car started, as Waffle continued to fire out of the passenger window at the boy's who held and fired the guns like huge toys, the rifles and pistols kicking out of their grip and shooting wildly through the windows of the apartment building's lower floors and through the doors and windows of cars in the parking lot. Two of them were shooting fairly directly at the vehicle in a berserking automatic expression of lead. Waffle thought he hit one of them but he continued to walk behind the car, aiming at the fleeing men, shrinking at their back and firing until a moment later he dropped to the pavement and the others gathered around him swiftly and Waffle turned around and Drano was yelling and sorting through the bag in his lap as they peel off into the lawless Tennessee afternoon. Waffle was still looking back, alternating between the windscreen and out of his window itself with the pistol clasped in both hands. They were still gathered with their various firearms aloft, some one hundred yards back now, and there were no gunshots for a few seconds. And then suddenly a flurry more at their hind. Muted now. Impossible. Drano's eyes on the rearview, the car whooshing along the unfamilar roads. They pulled out of the apartment complex.

All of them were out of sight now at the back, and they passed along the main road and descended a hill as if disappearing behind a wave, and the two shouting men washed into the swirling Tennesee valley and the mountain roadways like lakes of quicksilver, and Drano was particulate and infuriated, and he sorted through the bag on his lap with a dark sweating arm and the pills looked real, perhaps, but he could not believe that he hadn't listened to his intuition. And they drove on and Waffle kept looking behind and checking his gun. He had reloaded it professionally after exchanging fire with Koala's crew and, without a word between them as he drove, Drano handed the FN across the center console to Waffle and he ejected the clip did place some twelve 5.7x28mm shells into the spring loaded chamber and return it in silence to the owner, light and sleek and black through their rage and panic. They had not heard sirens. The men did not seem to be pursuing them by vehicle either. Drano pulled into a grocery store parking lot amongst a variegate scatter of vehicles. Both sat breathing and still glancing behind them out of habit and nerve and watching the rearview mirrors. Drano balled his huge fist and drove it straight and with great force into the center of the steering wheel and the horn chirped.
I told you that nigga was a fuck nigga! I told you, Waffle! Why you ain't speak up?
The fuck you want me to say, bro!
Say something, nigga.
Alright, nigga, let me say you don't need lean no more and I don't need to get in no shootouts for syrup I don't even fucking get to drink.
Nigga, you got money.
You know what I'm saying
Blue and green scenery backdropping their faces as they watch eachother and talk and equillibriate out of their respective adrenal conditions. Drano had some hardly twenty pills left and one sealed pint, if all of this was bullshit. If it was just cut was ideal. If it was cut with Fentanyl was not ideal, but he would likely sample it very conservatively for withdrawal symptoms. And if it were mere rubbish, some purple viscous fluid of no narcotic value then it was going out of the car's moving window or immediately back on the market. He fished the bottle of pills out and tossed the bag in the back and studied them against the sunlight passing through the windscreen, tree and leaf and sunlight spinning by through the young wind and they looked official and he pocketed them and cursed again to himself and Waffle sat shaking his head every thirty seconds or so, and they slid as if warping along through the country lanes back toward the highway, like two men strapped to some guidance system, and they were blank of expression and Drano had no idea where he was going to get juice and something in him felt ill and panicked and he sipped his cup and drove through the sunlight that bent like white sparks in honey through through the windscreen and he smoked cigarettes now, one after the other, and both men still checked over their shoulders and palmed their arms but less so now, and they wove along sunny lanes where penumbras of ice cream scoop shapes did lay where trees set them, and the dust lift at their passing as if in ritual, and Drano took the exit to the highway and was at once shuttled onto a largely empty and sprawling roadway and they passed along and Waffle started smoking again and he looked to Drano through the roiling clouds like a creature whose genesis was in the fog escaping a witch's cauldron.
Nigga. What you think happen when you die.
I don't know, nigga. The fuck you asking me this for.

Cos you gonna get a nigga killed.
I told you that nigga was a fuck nigga.
Yeah, well he a fuck nigga missing a shoulder now. Come on, nigga.
Come on, what?
What choo think happen?
When, nigga?
When you die, you dumbass nigga.
I don't know. I think there's a heaven and hell.
Yeah.
Drano rolled down his window and spat out of it. Wind rippled into the car in a fluid thrumming bombardment. He closed the window. The windscreen was like a crystal upon which the daylight was placing a thousand pulsing diamonds. They passed along the road and the sun wheeled in the sky pure white above them and it dragged pearlescent and incomprehensible across the ragged blue horizon like a huge white tentacled creature scuttling through the heavens in weightless conflagration. A host of sparrows passed over the highway some one hundred yards ahead and swept downward in the opposite lane in formation and disappeared into the creeping forest like arrows shot from bows. Waffle sat low in his seat, ensconced in the creamy vapour of his cigar. Still the car was fragrant with the sulphuric memory of gunpowder and the men knew this smell and it was upon their hands and they each could still smell it among them and upon their nerves over the course of a lifetime this scent had superscribed a series of associations so profound that each man would carry these with him as he did in this very moment now until his death. Drano fished the flip phone out of his pocket and called Ahab. They argued for sometime and Waffle could hear that both men were yelling at the selfsame time for much of the conversation until their blood settled and Drano asked if Ahab had heard anything about Panda and Ahab said he had not. Drano drove with the phone to his head and his brow a thousand furrows of frustration.
Niggas is looting here, Ahab said.
The fuck is going on?
I don't know, Ahab said. Niggas is wilding out.
Drano's eyes seemed to glaze over and he bore them like scopes before him into the roadway and blankly he wielded these from his head like giant wands and he could not resist in this moment propounding again on the person and circumstances surrounding Koala, and Drano's substantial financial loss, and the men took up yelling again as they had been originally and Drano felt near to throwing the phone from the car and in the stead of the phone he snapped this still thinly barking device shut and returned it to his pocket and he reached into the back and took the discombulated plastic bag of bottles into his lap and tossed it out of the window with a curse and there was a miniature explosion like grapes clustering spontaneously on an invisible vine that grew from the road behind them.
Waffle looked over at Drano.
How much that nigga take you for?
Like thirty bands.
How much juice you got left?
Like a pint, nigga.
Are you fucked, nigga?

Drano looked at Waffle and there was concern in his eyes and he said nothing and looked away to the road again, and there was a great silent weight upon them there in the car and the radio did not play and he drove and the engine turned cleanly and pure and the men sat with their thoughts as yellow sunlight flit across their forms, and their very shadows seemed to fluttered as if by the touch of wind, and their blood was settled now from the shootout and the warmth was soporific upon the men and into a sort of dream they drifted, the highway dropping away beneath them and plunging forever into the endless black ocean of the universe. They drove all day. Drano stopped only twice while the sun shone so that the men could void their bladders. When they reached Kentucky, the highways were deserted. Signs indicated that an evacuation of some order had taken place in the opposite direction, though neither had seen anything of the sort and they drove around the barrier and Drano's mind at once was upon whether or not he could successfully rob or break into a pharmacy, had the people abandoned their state, and Waffle did not seem to be concerned about these or any similar details of their passage east.

There were no police cars or military vehicles about and Drano and Waffle passed into a ghostly Kentucky, everything electrically lit and blue grey, and they pased under a swollen cobalt moon, and Drano rolled the windows down, and there were fields at their sides now and the smell of chestnuts and grass and manure greet them fragrantly through the warm night wind, and the car whooshed past towards the first clustering county lights and not a car was upon the the highway with them. So clean and quiet were these surroundings that the men felt as if they drove through a world of naught but porcelain figurines and blue milky light. Rows of corn and tobacco ran perpendicular to the road and the moon waxed mightily above them in a blue pulse, and they passed into the first county's main street like two men wandering through time paused. Boards shuttered the doors and windows of the businesses and they passed along into the residential section and so, too, had the citizens shuttered their fenestration and entrances and the men looked at one another baffled and silent. They did not seem particularly moved or concerned by any of this before them. It was almost as if the absence of police, or the avoidance of police was so overriding, that any condition into which they were ushered where this condition was satisfied was more or less acceptable.

They drove back to Main street. The shuttered windows and doors. Naught but the velveteen moonlight was there to guide their eyes and intentions. Drano parked the car smoothly outside the county's pharmacy. The store was enshadowed and a large board had been drilled at its corners so as to barricade the entrance from outside. Drano gestured to Waffle for the men to walk the area and to perhaps approach the pharmacy from the back and they passed along the street like still burning coals raked through the blacking embers of a dying fire. Their eyes and teeth floated along phosphorescently through oceanic blue night as they went gliding over the small Kentucky town's streets. They passed behind the pharmacy and there they found huge orange cats roaming and nuzzling in the moonlight and gathered there about a blown out black garbage bag and its reeking slew of trash. The men approached and the cats scattered like orbs of orange light and they withdrew sleekly to spying from the bushes on the periphery. The men stood at the back door of the pharmacy. Lightning tore down from the sky behind them and so mammoth and resonant was the bolt and its subsequent crack that a butterfly's chrysalis did prematurely perforate from within one of these peripheral bushes, and the butterfly's first vision from his new form misunderstood these men as part of his own blossomed body. These men and

all the warping world about him as he crackled out and swayed through the newly anointed world. The men could not open the back door. It was iron. They pass back around to the front, almost leisurely. Drano went up to the front door and examined the board shuttering it. He went to the car and fetched the canvass bag and returned and set to unscrewing the four corners. The board fell away and Waffle stood back and Drano took it and set it to the side and the door behind this was glass that looked like a sheet of pristine ice in the liquid night through which they moved. Drano told Waffle to stand back and to cover his face and he took a gleaming heavy iron wrench from the knapsack and it glowed in the moonlight like some insane elemental talisman that he alone could wield, and Drano took some steps back and did pitch this spinning towards the glass door, and the glass burst forth into the store like a puddle dashed by a passing tire from stillness to full fanning splash.

The moonlight slid in before them and it lit the shards at the entrance leading into the store like living jewels laid out for these vagrants to walk across in their entry. A constellation to wander above the strange conveyance of galaxies, each with its own dark will and, slouching along above there, Drano passed into the store. Waffle followed at his back and both men did crouch entirely beneath the door handle and pass through the lower frame itself into the dark pharmacy. It smelled of nothing inside the store. The aisles and racks were well stocked and the little moonlight allowed in through the reinforcements and shades did twinkle on the colors it could. They passed like wraiths swiftly to the back of the store. The pharmacy area itself was shuttered. A steel gate was lowered so as to enclose the entirety of it. Drano and Waffle looked at eachother. These were not their familiar obstacles. Drano follow the gate along the perimeter, studying it in the spare glow given through the entryway and he came to a keyhole labeled up and down, and he fetched the flathead from the canvas bag and zipped it shut and tossed it to Waffle and he did jam this into the keyhole with enough power sufficient to disturb the operation of it, and he wrenched the keyhole and it yielded right and the gate lifted on a sudden like a perforated iron wave evaporating, and the gate did take with it the flathead screwdriver upward to the ceiling, as Drano watched it rise for a moment and like a blade he cut into the pharmacy proper and began his raid. He swept everything to the floor that was not codeine syrup and opiates, and Waffle watched with eyes rolling about as if Drano was urinating on the altar of a church and hearkening those earnestly collected kneeling in the pews to approach in good spirit and join him. He went to the pharmacy's counter and fished a plastic bag from some place unseen below and Waffle watched as this man, with his huge haunted head and haunted life, moved shelf to shelf bagging great sealed bottles of syrup and large solid white five-hundred tablet plastic bottles and he came grinning, though his eyes haunted, out of the destroyed pharmacy, and the men were sucked as if through some poltergeist back into the car, and through the blue moonlight they did slide like two disgraced kings through the static of night and through the chirping of crickets like machinery of wooden reeds and leaf, and they passed along now through the tobacco fields under the clarity of white stars and the moon above them did appear to be something perhaps filled with a million white fleshy spiders. A bag that could burst at any single moment. The road was absolutely flat, and the fields at their sides ran to the horizon where mountains could be seen in miniature. Their crags and lining. Bristled with abyss colored furs about the foothills that ran in rows ascending the rock itself. Lightning seemed to rend the sky in half directly in front of them in a staggering pale blue division, striking and wobbling in a field

some two hundred yards ahead and curving. The inside of the car was bright blue and so loud was the thunder crack that each man unconsciously or reflexively did put his hand to his firearm and cringed and as they passed the field the lightning had chosen there, and there stood a massive burning willow tree, and it seemed all the horrid destiny of the world lay in that image as it flicker on their eyes in fluttering terra cotta and sink into the very fundament of their souls in some profound, involuntary manner, and Drano thought of his son and his son's mother. She was insane. So profound was her and her family's hate for Drano that they had nearly edged him entirely out of the boy's life. Screaming in the driveway and police. Curses promised upon the other. Oaths. He thought of his mother. Behold this man in excruciating pain with all the grief of the world upon him while driving a car and showing nothing of it. This gigantic headed felon, this opiod harried ilachrymable. Rain did suddenly whip across the windscreen in front of them and, so massive and acoustic were the droplets, it was as if a thousand watery mice had been loosed upon the car's hood from the sky, scrambling up the glass and over the men's heads and mindlessly backward along the car's length. Dropping back into the road. A hideous peel this rain did make against the metal and the glass of the car and the men regarded one another wearily from their seats and passed on and some hours later the rain lifted and those residual waters on the chrome hood were watched pulled rippling backwards up the glass of the windshield. A million fields tore away at their sides. A million moons. And warm and secret they passed into the deteriorating function of Virginia like two cells passing in finailty along on some network within a dying body.

XXVI

The sun rose and it woke Wayne and Wayne went and woke Ruggles, who bade him back to sleep and Wayne dressed in the early sunlight and wandered bobbing down the three stairs and he walked to the back window where he stood wordless, watching a red northern cardinal preside from a maple over a skittering murmuration of starlings, pecking at the earth below like some dark bishop, and he drank from the sink with his head tilted and a dreadlock did come swinging down into his open mouth and the water mixed with the furry appendage and he spat, wretching, moving away from the sink as if it had assaulted him suddenly. He walked to the bathroom and in the shadows there he voided his bladder. He returned to the kitchen and with a great clatter he found a stock pot and this he filled to a third of its volume with cereal and milk and he ate from this with a wooden spoon, sitting on a bucket on the bottom floor, watching the morning rise up toward them like some sick bright monster and he pitched the pot and spoon into the bowl and Ruggles did thrash in his bed at the clatter and yell from the upstairs and Wayne was not sure whether or not he heard Ruggles speaking and he carried on, sloping over to the hearth and taking up there and taking a bag of cannabis from his pocket. He sat there crinkling the small flowers into a dollar bill angled longwise and, when sufficiently filled, he slit the length of a cigar with a knife they had set on the hearth for this task alone, and he removed the guts and, spiderlike, replaced these with the accumulate of green crumble in the folded bill, and spun it again sealed shut, and he sat smoking and Ruggles was soon at the stairs and he passed down all three of them laboriously and haggard in his wrinkled sleeping clothes, and Wayne bade him a good morning and Ruggles nodded and sat down beside him and gazed off squinting at the warm glass as if it were some prophetic melting crystal case of birds and trees and light. They sat for

some time without speaking among the liquid chittering of morning birds and the rustle of wind, and Wayne, without any discernible stimulus, asked Ruggles if he believed in God.

I am having trouble right now.

Ruggles got up without another word and began walking in his creased bedclothes and crazed hair. Wayne followed. He walked out of the front door in his socked feet like a man carrying some great curse of God within him, eyes white lights alone, and he stumbled out tattered and deracinated like a ten thousand year old vampire who could no longer remember a word of his mother tongue or the face of his first love, and he collapsed in the penumbra of a neighboring yard's broom tree and he called upon God from his heart that He might be merciful enough to end his life and God did not end his life and he was forced to slouch back to the house in his dampened socks across the dewy grass and the rough stone drive. More than a month they had spent in this limboid state. A raven stood on the fence post twitching, watching him, as he passed slovenly beneath the creature's flickering and severe gaze. Once inside, Wayne asked what he had gone to do and he told him he had gone to check the mail.

You went the wrong way.

Oh.

Nigga, what's your deal today?

I'm good, man. I'm good.

Wayne eyed him wearily. Ruggles tried to reassure him with a smile but there was deep pain there plain in his eyes. The house was well lit in the full spring morning sun, and bright mustard light and shadow quivered warmly against every lit surface like the fire of heaven. The twigs and leaves in relief trembling against the wall. The men at the hearth, in such a roil of smoke so as to appear to be sitting in a tub of boiling milk, and Ruggles climbed away out of this fog and floated upward to his bedroom, where he threw open the curtain and changed into a pair of corduroys and a denim shirt and desert boots and he descend the stove-in staircase in leaps, and Wayne arose at his arrival and the men decided on the plan to bathe in active hot water. Law it seemed, as they understood it was no longer being enforced in the traditional sense if only for the lack of personage. A police cruiser had been seen zig zagging across the horizon a few days before. The men moved through this tundra like seeds carried by wind. They occurred as if specks on a huge grid absolutely indiscernible from any of other form of life, so vast and empty was the landscape. Wayne had spotted a single house with what appeared to be working light, a single bulb glowing from behind an unshuttered central top window. He glanced it from the crest of the hill returning the night before. They were interested, at any rate, to see if there were other residents cast aside or unable to leave the state on account of the conditions of their supervision by the courts.

They passed into sunlight. Wayne bobbed ahead of Ruggles with his bookbag bouncing, pavement blue with glittering quartz underfoot in the bright sun. Bulbous clouds that panicled in the sky like huge cotton hydrangeas and ran so high into the heavens as to look like snowy kingdoms in the warm spring sky. They passed through the neighborhood and a wind was at their back and the men were swept like two twirling leaves into the invisible vortices of breeze and counterbreeze, flipped along easily and smiling to one another in the fragrant sunlight. Birds were everywhere. Grackles outfitted in pauvine blue and wheeling through the almost chrome

blue sky. Black winged goldfinches and songbirds tunneling along, whistling and tilting in the wind above them.

They passed out of the neighborhood. Wayne had spotted the house on the way back from a very long walk the day before to a grocery store the next town over. So rent was the condition of the store, visible even from the furthest reaches of the parking lot, and so rank was it upon entrance that neither men could venture more than a few feet into the store without needing to run out immediately to clear and fill his lungs. Through the smashed fenestration, smashed outward from within, Ruggles could see the ceiling blacked with bats and there was a vulture in full fan within the store curving slowly and whooping over the wrecked aisles, riding the sick thermal updrafts drifting about therein now. Rats skittered and screamed viciously at the door, scattering in the approximate hundreds, and Wayne took a wayward cart near them in the lot and rammed it toward them and they scattered liquid like screeching in every direction. Wayne looked to Ruggles.

What the fuck you think is in there, Ruggles?

Death. It's just death in there. Let's go.

When the men turned around, the afternoon sun was pinkening and dragging West across the horizon and they walked on the skyline, tottering along and downward like things transferring from two to three dimensions and the clouds were afire with red and the air was cool and soft and so, too, the slopes they slanted along and Wayne looked with hostility upon any growing thing they passed or passed under and Ruggles asked him why and he asked Ruggles if he thinks any of these things care about him and Ruggles laughed, and they moved like waterspiders, one then the other, through the burning afternoon light, and they crossed through the now wildly overgrown backyards of houses, entire neighborhoods, that had been abandoned, or temporarily evacuated from. They scaled an ivy grown fence one a time and passed through a yellow glowing forest, as if stumbling entheomanically through the thin wooden ankles of the God and his elected.

They broke at length into the road and trot along the darkening pavement and the moon could be seen now as the sun sank out of view and a great green light vaulted the sky, and they cut through a shadowy lane where the men found bicycles outside of a shuttered house, and these they took furtive and smiling and they pedaled away wildly down the darkly glittering sidewalk. They passed along this way, pedaling smooth for some time along the occasionally twisted and fissured stone. The bristled rubber wheels vibrating patiently down pathways darkening blue, and along lanes of unlit houses.

Before the moon a cloud did hang so rent and tattered as to be hardly a cloud at all, and they passed along below in the pale milky light breathing in the trees and the flowers, as they issued their new flesh generously with a flowery musk in the dark. Spores in constant and spastic reorientiation in the evening breeze. They were coming down a slope with Ruggles was at the fore when Wayne spotted the house. Ruggles hadn't seen it. He had been in a sort of continuous argument with the gear shift system of the bicycle he had taken and was engaged suchlike when it came into view. They stood their bikes and watched the house. Wayne set his on the pavement at once and went and rang the doorbell. The house was shuttered. Ruggles stood tinkering with his bike in the road, and the chain fell away from the derailleur and he threw it to the ground in

disgust, standing in the road and scratching the back of his neck. Scanning the periphery. Wayne looked back at him and smiled.
Nigga, what you scared of people in general or something?
Yes. More or less.
Wayne took up banging on the plank shuttering the front door with the side of his little fist and after sometime he skipped down the porch and took up his bike and standing there in the navy blue dark did look to Ruggles and proclaim.
I'm a take a hot shower in that bitch.
Is that right?
You'll see.
They returned on foot today. They passed easily through the noon light, as if sliding upon a greased track. They set out from the house with hunger still raw and rotating in their bellies. Over the past month, they had eaten much of what was originally set aside at the grocery store. And they were running out of that now. Sunlight and warmth. Wind at their faces. Wayne bobbed along, slightly ahead of Ruggles, looking back and smiling. Child's heart brimming. The sun hung uncontested by clouds in a sky the color of a blue-tinged axe blade, and they moved through the silken apricot light in the manner of spectres or wind. They floated along, hovering almost. The pavement below them the color of living water and the sidewalk the color of sand. Some sentry posted invisibly on the skyline might have seen these two ragged silhouettes working downward the land.
A lone raven wheeled over the whole of their path like some sort of black feathered premonition. Water purled beneath them tinkling like animated glass as they pass over a small bridge and into a stretch of forest where pale Shagbark hickory trees grew like the tattered legs of scarecrows and Ruggles and Wayne hovered along over leaves crackling and fallen boughs, through the neon glowing forest. They trot along at an easy pace with squirrels chittering and giving chase in the branches overhead, and they broke at length through lined boxwoods into a backyard, and they passed between the houses into a neighborhood lane, talking and laughing in the sun. Ruggles looked to Wayne who was swiping his hands down his garments in the removal of burrs and petrified leaf fragment.
You're about to shower, bud. Take it easy.
Nigga about to get fresh is what's about to happen. I brought cologne in my bag.
We're not going to prom, Wayne.
What that is?
Prom?
Yeah. What that is.
It's a formal dance that high schoolers go to. I didn't go.
That shit sound gay as fuck.
It is. You ever had a girlfriend, Wayne?
Mane, nigga, come on.
I'm asking you a straight question.
What you think I ain't never had no bitch?
Ruggles laughed. I'm just talking to you, man. Relax.
Mane, I've had more bitches than I can count.

Is that right?
Sure is.
Lucky man.
Wayne glanced over to assess whether or to what to extent Ruggles had accepted these falsehoods and the men went along the curving neighborhood sidewalk easily like two wooden spheres about the rails of an abacus. They tumbled along through fluid bird calls and through the creaking of the forest, the swaying of trunks a hundred years weathered. Wayne skipped astride Ruggles and gave him a playful shove with his elbow.
Did you love your baby mama?
I don't even know how to answer that. I thought so, I did.
She cold.
She is cold.
They walked in silence for a moment.
Ruggles.
Wassup.
Why you ain't never try ripping a nigga off or stealing from me?
Ruggles laughed. What do you mean?
I just said it, mane. Like, you ain't never done no wrong by me. Or try to get some shit out of me.
I've lifted reefer off you when you've been asleep before.
Mane, that ain't shit. Come on.
What, everyone else you've ever known has fucked you over somehow?
Oh, for sure. For sure, mane.
They walked on for a bit.
Me too, Ruggles said.
Even my mama nigga.
Ruggles laughed and shook his head without further comment or query into the particulars of that euchre. They ascended a hill and stood atop the concrete plateau there looking down at the house. The home was a dark blue two story Gothic revival piece with a centered gable that extended out over the front porch and entrance. There were Rainbow Eucalyptus trees in the front yard, and fragrant rosebushes lined the earth about the perimeter of the front porch and lower windows. Great fleshy red petals spit therefrom and spun in lovely spiraled bundles that bobbed easily in the soft wind. They stood in the street watching the house as if it were some kind of giant living thing they were about to wake. The second story lights were still on. A starling darted by between them with wings fanned and it swooped upward into sunlight and radiant blindness. Ruggles spat and flicked his chin at the shuttered front door. Wayne looked. He started rubbing his hands together as if preparing to perform a spell on the house.
You've got to ring it again, man. Make sure that bad boy is empty.
You think them flocking niggas live in there?
Who?
The niggas we be hearing on the walkie talkie. They doing burglaries.
Ruggles shrugged. Go find out.

Wayne nodded and bobbed off. Ruggles stood watching as Wayne made his way across the front yard and up the stairs like some kind of rogue upright frog wandering the terra firma bearing a tarantula on his head. Ruggles laughed there standing in the wind, eucalyptus fragrant about him, cooling his nostrils. Wayne slammed the side of his fist against the shuttered door. He turned and grinned at Ruggles in the street and rang the doorbell some twenty times. Ruggles shook his head. He watched as this little black elf crept along the side of the house, rapping on any visible portion of glass, even with a single knuckle. The entire first floor was shuttered with large wood paneling, the screws of which were so bound into the house that they would need a drill to remove them. There was a window directly above the gable roofing that was not shuttered and all other fenestration was otherwise woodenly covered. Ruggles passed through the front yard, following Wayne around the back. An enormous spiderweb twinkled in the sunlight and Ruggles ducked passing under it and, coming around the corner, Wayne already had his face up to a slit between the wooden shutter and the glass of the back door. He held his face there as he spoke, hearing Ruggles slope up through the grass behind him.

Ain't no one in there. No one.

Ruggles nudged Wayne aside and looked in likewise. It's a nice house. Damn.

How we gonna get in this bitch?

Ruggles pulled his eye from the glass and surveyed the backyard. A party of Blue Jays stood tremulous and silent in the branches of a Red Maple.

I don't know, man. I don't know if we should.

Nigga, what? Come on.

We saw a cop the other day, Wayne. I don't know, man. I'm never going back to jail. Ever.

And we ain't going to jail today, mane.

Wayne stepped back and spat and surveyed the back of the house. He shook his dreads and said, I'm a have to climb this bitch, and he started back again through the warm grass toward the front of the house. Ruggles sloped along after him. A bumblebee droned by without taking any heed of him, and he saw clouds for the first time that day swing up into view on the horizon as he passed towards the front of the house behind Wayne. When he rounded the corner, Wayne was already standing along the railing of the front porch looking for some corner or ledge upon which to ascend roofward. He walked along sideways this way, palpating the gutter and looking variously at Ruggles for verification and Ruggles shaking his head on the front lawn in the shade of the eucalyptus tree. Wayne's eyes rolled around discombobulated and wild and he tottered and scaled along the railing until he came astride the house itself. He looked at Ruggles on the front yard and pointed to the gutter's drainage pipe there and shrugged.

What you think?

You can't really climb those. I've tried. They, like, implode.

All I got to do is like three feet from here, though.

I don't know. Wayne.

I'm a see if they got a toolbox inside so I can let you in. Otherwise I'll just kick the bitch out.

Ruggles knit his brow and Wayne began climbing the pipe and it crumpled with his grip as he ascend and it came unbolted from its bindings in several places but remained generally in place and he was able to board the slanted front gable without much difficulty, the window glowing at

the arc. He grinned down at Ruggles, huge child's eyes, from the black shingled slant. Crouched there on it like a gargoyle. Smiling. Little bookbag half on.

The gable itself sloped steeply and Wayne began up it on all fours sidewards, almost like some kind of strange leptosomal bear, and a thunderhead huge and grey passed before the sun and all that was warm was at once cooled by shadow and Wayne stood at the peak and grinned again at Ruggles, and he yelled, a nigga can smell that cologne right now, and he straddled the crest and shimmied along toward the window, the warmth and light therein, and he shuffled himself upright to standing again as he neared it and Ruggles watched with a hand over his brow from the yard.

Wayne was at the window now and running his hands along the frame. As if getting ready to perform a miracle of some kind or exorcise the house, he brought his pale palms up flat before him. He took a step forward and pressed his palms to the glass and bent his knees and pushed upward and the window gave loosely to opening at once, sliding as if upon a spring up to the ceiling, and the discoordination of force threw Wayne's footing, and Ruggles did watch as he fell backwards reeling, like through a thousand nightmares, arms wild in the air, and he did emit a scream of such profound fear to pronounce this moment that it hung in the sky like some new sick etching in the face of the universe, toppling backwards from the roof, his new sneakers catching in the gutter and sending him head first with arms at his sides into the huge iron grooved air conditioning unit with a sickening crunch and another muffled scream. Grass. Insects. Panting. Ruggles at the bushes and kneeling as if frantically gathering easter eggs about the boy and finding him there, his neck so grotesquely kinked from his fall that the vertebrae pushed to transparent outprint against the skin there. Wayne staring and crying, crumpled there permanently beside the air conditioning unit. His face torn from the rose bushes. Tears in the boy's eyes welling hugely in earnest fear. It cannot be undone. Can we undo this. It cannot be undone. Ruggles looked the boy over with wordless panic, instinctually thinking of transferring him out of the bushes and knowing he could not move him lest he break him somehow more or displace whatever fragile line it was that still tenuously secured his spirit to this now grievous corpus. All is grey above them and there is no warmth in this moment. Ragged cumulus clouds spun of the very materials of hell slid before the sun. Wayne crying on the ground, looking forever now at the bottom third of a rosebush next to which he had fallen. They met eyes.

Wayne.

I can't. His voice was hoarse and laboured. I can't move.

Wayne.

Just give me. A second. I'll. Get up.

Sadness so profound so as to wash the entire world itself away flooded through Ruggles as he watched his small friend permanently broken like a bird on the ground. Tears were falling across Wayne's nose into the mulch that his cheek was buried in. Ruggles walked back and forth through the grass. Gnats, a thousand of them. He ran back over and stood above Wayne and put his hands on his hips and scanned the horizon for anyone or anything that might allow him to help his destroyed friend. He looked down, tears in his own eyes. Wayne was crying in silence, his bottom lip quivering in the damp black mulch and peacock green beatles stumbling about his head in irritation. The flesh of his cheeks was torn on both sides from the thorns, and some of those barbs still clung there in his dark young flesh.

Ruggles. He coughed. Ruggles. What. We. Gon. Do.
Ruggles looked over his shoulder to blot the tears out of his eyes.
It's going to be okay, man. Tell me how I can help you, Wayne.
What. We. Gon. Do.
I don't know. I can't fucking leave you to look for help that's not here for us.
Can. I. Walk. Again?
Ruggles looked at his crankled form. The bones jutting out at the neck in alien and knobby exposition. His breathing hoarse and labored.
I'm going to get these thorns out of your face, okay, Wayne? Ruggles leant hard into the neighboring rosebush obliviously and with the careful fingers of a mother he plucked therefrom that child's face some four rose barbs hooked deep in his brown flesh. Wayne smiled weakly and tears ran from his eyes. Ruggles kept looking away and taking advantage of Wayne's limited range of sight to hide his own tears. He sat beside him in the bush. He put his hands on the boy's chest, and it raised and lowered in broken and jerking gradients. It was warm. Wayne lay breathing there a moment.
Ruggles.
Yeah, man.
Ruggles. Get. Me. Out. Here.
I can't move you, man. I might break. Your neck or something else.
I'm broke. I'm. Broke. Ruggles. Already.
No, man. Please. It's going to be all good. Just let me think. Let me think.
Ruggles. I'm. Broke. Already. Move. Me.
Ruggles was in the bushes with him. Dread filled him for he knew he could not leave the boy there. He thought of moving his small crumpled form and feeling things fracture, or the boy dying outright in the shifting. It cannot be undone. And behold, outside of time entirely, Ruggles glanced at the sky and saw still curving that lone Raven and it swam as if churning those grey clouds, or guarding the very earth from them, he was not sure.
Already. Broken. Ruggles. Move. Me. Nigga.
Ruggles told Wayne to wait and he went to the lane and he scanned the horizon. He crossed backwards through the yard and scanned the panorama of sunlit woods and rows of furred trees that trembled in the wind. He returned to Wayne. Wayne was crying fully now, like a child. The crying overwhelmed his ability to breathe and he began to hyperventilate and Ruggles set down aside him again and seized his small insensate hand. It felt like a sophisticated prop in Ruggle's hand so bizarrely unresponsive was it.
Can you feel that?
Move. Me.
Ruggles was crying openly before the boy there in the yard now, a man cursed to wander the world in such solitude as to fill ten thousand lives. This boy. This little felonious boy, whom the world had forgotten in some concrete corner. Ruggles willed in his most earnest spirit silently that God revise it so that they switch places and he be the one confined to the mulch and bush, broken until his certain death. A black ant tumbled out beneath a woodchip and began up Wayne's face as if it were any other form of earth there. Ruggles carefully brought it away. He had to move him.

Ruggles. I'm a be okay? He was crying hard.
Yes. Yes, man.
You. Like. You. Like. My. Brother.
Ruggles could not respond to this sincerely at the moment lest he disperse into ten thousand tortured pieces in wailing and tearing his hair from his head, and he told Wayne, instead, Don't get sentimental on me. You're going to be fine.
Move. Me. Ruggles.
He had to move the boy.
What if I break you?
I'm. Broke.
There was another ant venturing his face and Wayne, his wild little friend, so wild as to have become anti-wild, averse to the alien green look of nature in image alone, and now confined paralytically to a bed of mulch and ants and thornbush and beetles and grass. He had to move the boy. He carefully moved the ant away, and stood up, ripping his right arm along the adjacent bush. He scanned the boy's crumpled supine position. Wayne followed with his right eye.
How am I going to move you, man? I can't grab you at the neck.
Please.
It occurred to him that he had never heard the boy use this word before this moment.
Please. I'm. Already. Broken.
Ruggles knelt beside him, tears running hot and unlimited down his face. They had both forgotten their hunger. They had forgotten everything, as everything had forgotten them.
Please. Ruggles.
Wayne. It could fucking kill you, man.
Wayne coughed. A tear rolled from his eye into the fragrant warm pitch.
Where do you want me to move you?
Out. This. Bush.
Ruggles knew he had to move the boy. He knew no help was coming but he prayed earnestly in his mind for some miracle. But nothing could put the boy back together. Ruggles thought to himself that even if an ambulance were to come, Wayne would likely not live. Even with sophisticated medical care.
Tears distorted everything, and he beheld the world through bleary lenses and Wayne was coughing in the bushes. He said, please, again, and Ruggles slid his trembling hands and flattened arms through the mulch under the boy's thighs and the center of his back and he lift his broken weight and the boy wailed out and Ruggles felt something shift weirdly in his left hand and his stomach whirled and he took three steps and laid the boy in the grass. They were both crying openly now. Wayne was breathing fast, asking if he was going to die. Ruggles told him that he wasn't going to, and he did not know whether or not this was wrong, for he understood without illusion that the boy was going to die. Ruggles stood there crying above the panting boy like some crazed penitent over some rueful Isaac ruined of slipped hand. Or perhaps he, Ruggles, the last stubborn human soul in purgatory after the end of the world. Wayne was coughing on the ground. Ruggles came beside him and put a hand to his forehead and moved his dreadlocks from where they had fallen over his face while being moved. The boy would have said nothing. He told Ruggles that he didn't want to die. That he had only slept with one girl. But not really. That

he had shot out of a car, but that he had aimed at the sky on purpose so as to miss. He told Ruggles these things with great severity and strained breath and tears running freely from his eyes.

Stop. You're going to be okay. I know you've had more bitches than me, bud. Shut up.

Nah. I ain't. Have shit.

Ruggles sat in the grass sobbing silently out of sight and pulling up tufts of warm grass in conscious adversary to the living earth. Wayne told him that he didn't want to die hungry and Ruggles again said he wasn't going to die. It was grey all about them and heavy grey clouds drank greedily all the warmth from the sun and turned on the darkling skyline menacingly and ragged. It could not rain. He was kneeling beside the boy, helpless.

What. We. Gon. Do.

Ruggles was silent, looking away and crying into his shoulder.

It. Gon. Rain.

Wayne could see the world through which he had once moved with arguable freedom reduced to black and blades of grass and a rupturing wild sky. Ruggles told him that if it started to rain again he could move him onto the porch. Wayne said nothing.

Get. Help.

There's no one, Wayne. Please. Please be okay.

Ruggles looked about them at the neighboring houses. He needed to get them at least into a house. Or an umbrella. Something to serve as a stretcher. An ironing board.

I need to get into one of these houses. Ruggles knelt in the grass by Wayne studying the neighboring houses for ingress. Wayne was silent. There were tears rolling from his eyes. He asked Ruggles if he was going to be able to walk again. Ruggles said that they had walked far enough and he needed to get into one of these houses, and Wayne bid him go and called him back after some seconds, saying he was scared, and Ruggles knelt by him and reassured him and told him he could see him the whole time. Wayne said he was thirsty. Ruggles ran across the street like something on fire and he went loping between the houses and studied them from the back and the house on the left had an unshuttered basement window and he ran back to Wayne, panting, and told Wayne he could get an ironing board from the house and move him inside, and Wayne said he didn't want to be moved again. The boy lay there like a dislocate heart bleeding and pumping. His eyes huge with innocence and fear.

Ruggles.

Yeah.

Ruggles.

Yeah, Wayne.

Water.

I'll have to get it out of the house.

Never. Mind.

Let's get you inside, Wayne. Get some cologne on you, bud.

Ruggles held his excruciating and tear streaked visage outside of Wayne's line of sight.

I can put you on an ironing board like a stretcher and we can get you inside, okay, Wayne?

No. Don't. Leave. Me.

Ruggles sat for sometime holding the boy's hand and they cried silently, their insides thrashing mutely, out of one another's sight and the happier for it. Ruggles stood up and scanned the skyline again. There were no cars. There was nothing. He surveyed the opposite side and the connecting panoramas. No one. Wayne called him down and he went close to him at the earth and Wayne asked for water, but asked how long Ruggles would be gone for, and he stared forward crying into the grass and storm clouds while he weigh these notions, and he told Ruggles that he was cold in a hoarse, dying voice.

I'm going to get supplies, Wayne. I have to. I have to. If I sit here with you, we could get caught in the rain or we'll be sitting here at dark.

Don't. Move. Me. Again. Something. Something. Happened.

Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Wayne.

It's. All. Good.

I'm going to get you water and I'm going to look for an umbrella and whatever else I grab.

Ruggles.

Yeah.

I'm cold.

I'll be back in five minutes, Wayne. Five minutes, just hold tight for me, buddy. You got this.

Ruggles stood quickly and ran sobbing through the yard around the backyard of the house across the street and his very spirit gnashed wildly within him as he kicked in the unshuttered basement window and went recklessly down through the jagged glass, catching and slicing his rib indifferently as he dropped down into a dewy brown utility room, pale lit from the grey light. He passed over to the door and moved blindly and panicked through a nigh black finished basement. Light from the window bent through the open door of the utility room and Ruggles pursued that which the light into consideration, snatching up a pile of blankets from the couches there, and running upstairs, arriving in a kitchen scant lit by the oblique sunlight escaping in through gaps in the shuttering. He stood panting and blinking there in the kitchen, holding the blankets. He saw a phone on the wall and he put it to his ear and it was silent. He checked the refrigerator and it had two cans of soda in it. The cupboards.

There were a few dusty cans of beans in the cabinet and he knotted all of these together in the blankets and set them beside the front door. He went to a closet beside the entrance and fumbled through the dark of coat closet until he came upon the haptic shape of an umbrella stood upright against the lower back wall. The door to his right was shuttered from outside, but it opened inward from the front. Ruggles tossed the umbrella with the rest of the effects and flew over and unlocked the front door and pulled the gilded gold handle inward and it swung open and a warm sheet of wood hung blocking his egress.

He stood blinking at this for a moment and stepped back and then forward again quickly twice and kicked it to buckling fracture down the center, as if the house was on fire, and Wayne heard the clamor with alarm from his place on the lawn opposite and thought something was coming for him, and Ruggles burst out of the front door with the blankets and the sodas and the beans yelling, Hang on, Wayne, I'm coming. I'm coming, in a high and urgent voice that Wayne had not heard Ruggles use before.

Ruggles. Ruggles.

Ruggles came aside him in the grass.

Ruggles.
Wassup, Wayne. I got some stuff for you, man.
Ruggles.
Yeah?
I was. I was. Scared. When you left. I was scared. Ruggles.
It's okay, Ruggles said, wiping his eyes against his sleeves out of sight. It's okay, buddy. I'm right here.
Don't leave. Again. Please.
I won't, buddy. I won't.
Ruggles shook out the blankets and spread them over Wayne there in the grass and he shew Wayne the soda pops and Wayne managed a weak smile through his tears and Ruggles tried to pour bits of this in his mouth and it gurgled thinly at his lips and ran away into the grass, but seemed to slake the dryness in his mouth and he asked Ruggles to promise not to leave him there again and Ruggles said that he wouldn't and it did not rain and they sat there crying on the lawn together in open sight of one another exchanging words of truth and love and candor and Ruggles did cry out to God silently within himself that he should be so damned for the boy to die here before him on some stranger's lawn like a sick dog, and Ruggles sat beside him weeping into his knees, and Wayne wept and the sun slanted down til it became a mere orange slit on the horizon, and the storm clouds tilted out of view and they set in the moonlight there, crickets chirping about them. Ruggles looked up and Wayne was unconscious, or sleeping.
Wayne.
Ye - Yeah.
Just checking on you.
I had a dream. I had a dream. I was in a graveyard. And. And. A. Statue came to life. And walked up to me. And took me by the hand. And I realized. I. I. I was. A. A. Statue. Up until. That point. I turned. And saw. Saw. A. A. Church.
Wayne.
And. And doves. Doves were. Everywhere. Everywhere.
Ruggles looked down at the grass and heaved inwardly and held the boy's numb hand and Wayne asked if he was going to die that night, and Ruggles just said that everything was going to be okay and he stared into the blank night, star sprent and terrifyingly black, and the boy kept repeating his request that Ruggles not leave his side again, and he asked Wayne what if they run out of soda and the boy only insisted that Ruggles not leave his side, and he called him his brother again and Ruggles called him his brother and they wept to excess and were able to laugh for only a moment, and it all came upon them again that they would never walk from this spot to some future hijinks, that their paths forever split until death from this lawn. Ruggles looked him in the eyes. The dislocated disks in his neck prodded weirdly against the wall of his neck and the impression it made there was ghastly in the moonlight. Tears welled in the moonlight.
I can take you inside, Wayne.
Don't. Don't Move. At all.
They set still in the sounds of the night. Wayne coughed.
Ruggles.
Yeah.

You think. You think. Jesus. Was the Real. Real God.
Ruggles sobbed in between his knees and he hugged his head with his arms. Yes, he said.
Easy. Easy to say. When you ain't. Face down. In the grass.
Come on. You always have faith.
I'm. I'm playing.
It's gonna be okay, Wayne.
Yeah.
Ruggles looked off across the street at the house he had broken into. He gazed at the dark gathering at the half open door and he bore his eyes through this like two mechanical rods and only more dark did they find. The moon was was waning crescent and the light was weak and clouds hung on the furthest reach of the horizon and rain was withheld, and after some time Ruggles looked over and the boy was sleeping, and he sat sobbing in the grass like a child bullied there, and he pulled at the tufts through some senseless infantile instinct and looked at the boy occasionally as if to recharge his sobbing, and the boy's eyes were still closed and his breathing labored and he did not know how he would go forward without this impish black felon with him to help navigate the desecrated landscape.
Ruggles.
Yeah.
Jesus.
What?
I Had A. Dream. Jesus. That He's Still. Still On The Cross.
What do you mean?
It's Happening. Somewhere Else.
Ruggles was sobbing and he heaved so hard that Wayne in his brokenness and largeheartedness did actually feel sympathy for the man and pursued the dream no further, and he lay staring blankly at the grass as if there was nothing before his eyes whatever and he told Ruggles again that he was cold, and Ruggles secured the blankets about his crooked form and patted them about his perimeter, there in the evening dark on the front lawn, wherefrom they lay in the grass making some last stand as a pair now sundered. Everything was black about them and croaking with the chatter of insects and frogs, and fireflies did alight above their huddled forms now, signaling neon and teleporting and signaling again. Ruggles looked at Wayne. His skin had paled so much as to appear almost whitish purple, phosphorescent in the thin moonlight. He was shivering.
I can get more blankets, Wayne.
No. Don't Go.
Okay.
Ruggles.
Yeah.
This. This Shit Gay. But. I Wanted To. Get Married. I Really. Wanted. To.
You'll get married, Wayne.
You. Think. We'll Have. Wives in Heaven?
Ruggles through tears silent and runneling said that he thought, yes, we had wives in heaven.
Ruggles.

We're going to get through this, Wayne. We're going to get through it, bud. I'm right here.
Don't Leave. Me Again. Please.
I won't, Wayne. I won't.
Ruggles looked over and the boy's eyes were closed and he thought of what the boy had said, that Jesus was still on the cross in some other world and that perhaps all of human history, prior to and following his crucifixion, occurs during the three days that Jesus hangs on the cross in some other sandy and ancient dimension. And this not yet having been fulfilled, Ruggles could perhaps understand the state of the ruined firmament across he wandered. He sat in the grass beside the boy and he held his knees and looked out at the night sky. The moon was like a narrowed and whited eye swum above them and the stars shone so brightly against the crumpled dark as to almost resemble punctures in an enormous black film through which light passed from some other sunlit world. The boy was coughing and his chest heaved. His eyes flickered open and closed again. He was still breathing.
Ruggles stood up and watched Wayne's eyes and they did not open and took the few strides back to the bush where Wayne's knapsack lay behind the airconditioning unit. He brought the bag back beside the boy and his eyes were still shut and he shuffled back down into the grass beside him. He unzipped the bag and looked at the boy's effects. There was a change of clothes foldly neatly and for some reason regarding the boy's conscientious packaging of these garments, to be never worn, weighed upon him with such a smarting and pervasive grief that he thought he might never repair. He opened the second warm cola and sipped from it sparingly. Ruggles thought of cigarettes and he punished himself ruthlessly for this and tore at the grass and he did grow so tortured and panicked watching breath shudder through the bulbously displaced passage of Wayne's esophagus that he did stand without looking at the boy's eyes and go to the middle of the neighborhood lane and cry out for help to anyone who could hear. He yell in all directions, Wayne's eyes snapping open on the lawn and seeing only grass and night sky and he thought upon hearing Ruggles cry out so that some new emergency was upon them, and he willed himself up from the grass and nothing happened and his eyes welled with tears and he called out for Ruggles weakly, and Ruggles could not hear him so intensely he was howling out into the silent night. His voice carried across the wind like some kind of formal announcement of horror and it echoed back to him from the void, and his plea sounded grotesque and ridiculous. It sounded unheard is what it sounded echoing back to him so. He scanned the dark skyline in all directions and there was no movement or light or activity. Wayne was still calling to him weakly from the lawn and coughing. Ruggles bound back towards the boy as if he had spotting something having arrived to drag his broken body screaming away into the black lit forest. Wayne's right eye searched for him wildly and Ruggles pants came into view and a moment later he was folded in the grass beside Wayne. Wayne was saying still repeating his name.
Ruggles.
I'm here. I'm sorry.
What's. Happening.
Nothing. It's okay, bud. It's okay. I was just trying.
Someone. Here?
No, Wayne. It's just us. I didn't mean to scare you.
I Thought. Someone Was Hurting. You. When I Heard. You Yelling Like. That.

No, no. It's okay. You can go back to sleep. I'm sorry I got up.
Please. Don't. Leave.
I won't, Wayne.
And Ruggles slouched in the grass there and the sky seemed to rotate above them monstrously. They were bound to darkness there together on the lawn and Ruggles would not leave him again. The boy passed into and out of consciousness. Ruggles realized he had brought only enough of his medicine for this evening and he did not care, and his eyes grew heavy, and they slept in the grass like rabbits and sometime in the night Ruggles woke and a possum was waddling onto part of Wayne's blanket, and, horrified, he scrambled up and stood back reeling and spat at the creature and it hissed at him and turned away with its whispy formal cloak, and Wayne's eye opened frantically and Ruggles would not tell him what had just happened. He told him instead that he had gotten up to piss and Wayne looked down into the grass, and Ruggles understood and neither man said more on the subject. Ruggles laid back beside him on his side there in the grass and they looked at one another and closed their eyes and slept until morning and they awoke with ants crawling about them, and the morning was watery and pale and grey and the sun moved obliquely through the heavens as if avoidant, and Wayne came awake in the dawn so pale and empurpled that he looked almost entirely extraterrestrial. There was sweat glistering along his grapeskinned brow and Ruggles felt the boy's forehead and it was grotesquely warm and Wayne's eyes bulged now. They raced about bloodshot and his speech was fevered and panicked. He was delerious. Ruggles could hardly look at the boy in the grey dawn so alien was he with death and deformity.
I Thought. You Left.
I was here all night. How are you doing?
Soda.
Ruggles took the can from the grass. The boy had only managed a few sips the day before and it sat flat in the can. He brought it down to Wayne's lips and he tilted the can and let it run thinly by them and the boy slurped weakly at the stream and coughed, and it ran again into the grass at his cheek, and he thanked Ruggles and Ruggles set the can aside. A grey cat slunk out of the dawn vapour and crept across the front yard of the house Ruggles had broken into across the street. It moved about the lawn like a distribution of quicksilver and stole silently upon the lightest paws up the front porch of the home and moved sleekly circling about the shadows at the open door, mewing and sniffing at the air. Wayne asked Ruggles what he was looking at and he said nothing, a cat, and his heart filled with sadness, and birds chittered about them and starlings took up in the branches of the rainbow eucalyptus and they leapt about chittering and squeaking. A hawk tunneled through the air overhead. There was dew on the grass, but it had not rained. Ruggles looked at Wayne. Wayne could not see him. The boy had grown quiet this morning. Serious and reticent. Ruggles could see this in him. A blue jay took up on the clean painted railing of the front porch that Wayne had crept along the day before.
Ruggles.
Yeah.
You Go On. I'm. Aiight.
I promised I was staying.
Ruggles. Go.

The boy was crying again. They had just woken there on the grass like stray dogs and already in the ghostly dawn they sat weeping desperately. The wind howled against their forms there and Ruggles felt his hunger and his weakness and he lay back beside the boy. The boy told him again to leave, crying, and he told him he would not. That they spent everyday together and this was no different than any other day, and Wayne no longer humored him with smiles as if Ruggle's entirely feigned optimism relieved the grief of his heart. Clouds hung milk white in the sky and puddling above them billowing and vaporous. A toad lept across the damp lawn in starts and checks and it looked wild as it hung in the air above the grass like some kind of reeling hobgoblin. Ruggles could feel the distortion in his blood brewing from missing his medications, and there was no one to walk to the pharmacy with him now. His impish companion leaping the counter of the abandoned pharmacy the first time as if it were built for that act alone. There was no one to walk with him now. The boy wheezed staring into the grass. His eyes were vacant, and tears slid sideways from them across his blank expression into the grass below. The boy's voice was quietened now and his breath laboured. A woodpecker was working about the trunk of a massive American beech tree in the neighboring backyard. Ruggles could hear it. It smelled of fog and wet grass and the mulch was fragrant at their backs as the sun now warmed the firmament, however distant and pale it hung in the spread of clouds. It was dawn. Sometime between six and seven in the morning. Blackbirds rushed down like gothic confetti into the yard across the street and Ruggles wondered if the cat had gone inside the house. He felt Wayne was going to die at any moment and he could not bear the notion of getting up and walking home alone and carrying his little bag and what to do with his little corpse and he would have to come back and bury the boy in the law properly and Wayne sat wheezing beside him staring into the metallic condensation of dawn and the blades of grass in his left eye. He was still weeping silently and sweating at the brow. He said he was hot and Ruggles pulled away the blankets and he had forgotten how crankled the boy's thin form was and his empty stomach spat acidically within him and swung and he set the blanket at the boy's feet shuddering.

Is that okay?

I'm Finna. Die Today.

Stop.

It's Okay.

Stop.

The boy told him it was okay again and told him to go, with tears running from his eyes and his lip quivering, and Ruggles reassured him, and the dawn was like some horrid thing slanting across the earth greyly and now coming upon them, discovering them. They sat in silence for some time among the chatter and transfer of birdcalls and the creak and howl of windblown boughs. Ruggles felt itchy all about his person with grass and he felt as if ants were all about his form, having woken up so. Nascent brain fever. He would have to come back and bury the boy properly and the thought unfolded him again and he shift his eyes out of view and cried out to God from within him and the boy wheezed silently there at his side, doing much the same. He asked Ruggles to tell him the truth about his life and he said he did tell the truth, and Wayne said he told the truth sarcastically and guarded. And Ruggles told him that his life was a lonely one. That he ached with the failure of his marriage and family life. That the dissolution of that union had been so confounding to him and so heartbreaking as to at times having actually lain him out

in a sort of similar paralysis. That he could not reckon how she could never love him. But she could never love him, he knew. Wayne was crying. He said he was certain he was in love with her when they wed. That it had formed such an impression on him, making that promise, that it had etched something in his heart and he forever was willing to adopt the ideal of this woman again and take her on as if new. She, never so. He spoke of death. Of being outcast by family. He stopped speaking of this and he broke and looked to Wayne crying in the grass for his still able bodied friend.

I can't lose you, he said. I can't lose you, Wayne.

Wayne lay crying for a moment and soon he sobbed openly like a young boy. Ruggles sat in the grass sobbing likewise. Bumblebees droned in the rosebushes at their back. The sun revolved burning in the sky, and the clouds sagged at the periphery in smooth furrowed distributions. Ruggles sat blinking. He could not walk home alone from this place without Wayne and wake up and carry on and come back and bury the boy. It could not be. He could not do this without Wayne.

Please, Wayne. Please.

Wayne was staring forward, crying and silent. He told Ruggles to go again, and Ruggles would not. It started to warm and Wayne complained again that he was hot and Ruggles gave him some more soda and soon he said he felt too cold and Ruggles again pulled the blanket over him and Wayne lay shivering in the sunlight. A raccoon, on its final pursuit of an elongated night, went wading and sniffing across the grass toward the trashcans, it seemed, permanently placed so across the street. Small bandit creature. Ruggles told Wayne he was going to the road again and he went and he did howl at the end of his broken voice for help in all directions and the sound was abhorrent to Wayne's fevered mind and to Ruggle's own as it was wrought with the severity of the boy's condition and so enpained as to echo downward into hell quite familiarly. Birds scattered freely into launch without plan and he scanned all perimeters for some response as they shuffled up into the misty dawn like living flowers. He returned next to the boy in the grass. Wayne searched him out and found him with his upward eye.

Stop.

I'm sorry. I just have to try.

You Can. Go.

He took Wayne's hand. It was cold and it moved rigidly now, as if weighed down. He did not understand how long the boy could live in this state, and he did not will him die and he sat desperate in the overwhelming steel dawn like a man condemned, there agonized in the extended penumbra of the eucalyptus tree. The boy closed his eyes and lost consciousness sometime thereafter and Ruggles watched his labored breathing, and he did take the boy's small knapsack and pluck from it the bottle of cologne and dab it on his own neck and then Wayne's deformed neck and the boy lay wheezing and soon his eyes opened, protuberating now and severe in their articulation of ocular blood vessel, yellowing almost, as well. He looked to Ruggles.

I Saw. Something. Terrifying.

It's just a dream. You have a fever.

It Wasn't. No Dream.

It's okay.

No. It's Not.

It’s just a dream.
It. Was More.
Ruggles sat looking away. What was it?
It Was. Hell. Hell.
You’re not going to hell, Wayne.
There was. Insects. Everywhere. Niggas Screaming.
It’s not real.
I Was. Stuck. There. Like This.
It’s not real.
Pray. For Me.
Wayne, it’s not real. Stop.
The boy had foreign terror deep set in his bulging eyes and he sat there panting in the grass like a dying animal and Ruggles felt death so strong upon them that at any moment he would not have been surprised to have been taken instead by mistake, and Wayne’s chest was rising and falling faster now. Ruggles thought of walking home without Wayne and he thought of lying down in the road and dying.
Wayne, I can’t do this without you.
What’s. This.
Life. Just day to day. Please. You’re my best friend.
There Were. Insects. Everywhere. Ruggles. Please. Pray.
Ruggles knelt in grace over Wayne and he did solemnly pray, and Wayne watched him with the severity of a blade with his free eye, and closed his own eyes for emphasis after a moment, and Ruggles prayed forgiveness both of their sins in the burgeoning sunlight, and Wayne seemed satisfied when Ruggles made the sign of the cross and then again over Wayne’s form, and whether he had the authority to do so, or whether this was formally appropriate, neither could have cared less, and Ruggles ended the small awful ceremony on the lawn and sat in Wayne’s bleary view, and he looked sincerely to the boy, a horizontal silhouette with the newly broken sun in radiant yellow outline about him.
Please, Wayne. It’s not real.
I Can’t. Go. To Hell.
You would never. It would cough you up on contact. You had a nightmare. You have a fever.
He’s Still. On. The Cross. Somewhere Else. You Could. See Him. From There.
Ruggles registered this heavily on the lawn as something like theological fact, and at the same time expressed himself on the subject to Wayne as if shooing away a figment from beneath a bed, and Ruggles thought of the image, watching Christ suffer from beneath a frenzied avalanche of insects, men screaming. He shuddered and told Wayne again that he would not go to hell. Ruggles thought to himself that he did not care if the world ended and it seems already to have done so and yet he sat there caring a great deal. He sat with his hands about his knees in the drying grass looking at the skyline. It did not look as if it would rain today. He did not care. He cared if the boy did. The boy sat wheezing.
Ruggles.
Ruggles was staring off when he said this and started.
I’m sorry, what’s up.

Ruggles looked and there was a bee droning down on Wayne's face and glimpsing all over his form. Tears ran from his eyes into the soil and the bee visited near his face. Ruggles crept in and swept at it and it wove about his hand and stung it at once and Wayne apologized and Ruggles scrambled up from the grass and smashed the bee dead with his throbbing hand and sat down again beside Wayne.
It stung me.
Sorry.
No, I'm just telling you. It's my fault.
Thanks.
They sat warming in the sun like forsaken cats or birds. Wayne felt it upon his face and he felt strange things elsewhere within him, broken and polluting him in their brokenness. Polluting his brain even in their brokeness now. He prayed wildly in his head for forgiveness and cried. Ruggles watched him askew. Wayne could not see his eyeline from where he set. Wayne's eye began searching him out.
Ruggles.
Yeah.
What. Choo. Finna Do. Without. Me.
Wayne. Don't leave me. Don't fucking leave me.
What. Choo. Finna Do.
I can't, Ruggle said.
Please.
I can't.
You Will.
I can't.
You will.
And the morning unraveled about them on the dark green lawn in chatter and chirping and shuffle. Mockingbirds skipped along some further down the sloping grass and Ruggles watched them wondering if human beings were the only creatures on the planet that lived in such confused agony, and he was certain that this was the case, for there was no wolf that gnashed out at God for the nature of its hunt and the vagaries of its pack. But he could not know. Perhaps the same granular spiritual energy was what compelled each willed creature. Some bands of electricity or some glow. Wayne could not die. He wanted to slap the boy, he felt. He could not die. He asked forgiveness for wanting to slap the boy and he did not understand this, and the boy smiled weakly at him in this moment and his heart was overcome with grief and he did cry openly before him and come above him and hug him about his wrecked body meekly, crying that he get up and that he be okay, and the boy lay, allowing the man to hug but knowing he incapable, and he hated the grass at his eyes and he hated all of this growth shit around them, and he thought he saw ghosts drifting over the lawn and he forgot for a moment in his sick brain who Ruggles was and he was overcome with panic and certainty that the man clutching him was evil, and he drew quiet and serious and stared into the grass alone. Ruggles swung back up into view and their eyes met and recognition registered again and enormous relief passed through Wayne's dying brain and soul that he was not in the company or literal clutches of some evil man, and he told Ruggles that he dreamt of walking in a field and that Jesus was with him.

Wayne, Please.
I'm. Not. Scared Now.
The full noon sun hung above burning down on them like two wilting plants that had not taken properly in the soil, and they lay in agonized flexure together on the lawn. They fell asleep again for some time, so little had they eaten and so much had they wept already that day. And when they woke this next time, Wayne only stared into the grass. He was breathing, though barely, wheezing lightly and fast into the lawn. Ruggles regarded him upon waking and the boy was nearly blue. Wayne's lips were white and his eyes bulged insanely from their sockets like there were a fire in his skull they were sparing themselves from. His forehead glistened with sweat. All of his child's face. There was a dreadlock that had fallen, black and blonde into his eyeline. He had said nothing. Ruggles moved it aside and back behind the boy's ears. He could not walk home alone. A Northern Cardinal stood in the branches of the eucalyptus tree by itself. It did not move and it watched them. Wind played lightly upon the branch and the red bird accepted the resultant swaying with grace, eyes black and serious like something scorned and intelligent. Ruggles watched the bird and it regarded him regally and seriously. Wayne asked what he was looking at and Ruggles said nothing.
Am I. A Bird?
What?
Am I. A Bird?
No. You're a person.
He could tell the boy was serious, that he was dying and that the impairments were settling into his brain. Ruggles thought of black ink moving nefariously through clear water in dark skeins and blooms. The boy regarded him skeptically.
Auntie? The Fuck. Bitch ass.
It's me. Ruggles.
Sorry.
Ruggles lay beside the boy and the sun hung above them majestic and victorious and the sky was the color of a burnished guillotine and the grass like dark lords all about them, gathered and in frenzied indulgence, and he told the boy that everything was going to be okay, and the boy told Ruggles that there was a snake behind him, and he told the boy it was just a dream, and the boy repeated himself and said again, brokenly, there is a snake behind you, for he could see it from where Ruggles had propped his arm, and Ruggles turned and saw the snake and it coiled at his glance, fragrant with aggression and repugnance, and at once it fluttered and hissed and it backed away a little but it would not move, and Wayne watching it, terrified, wheezed out for Ruggles to kill it and Ruggles did stepped once across the lawn hard towards the hissing thing and bring his right sole above the grass and down against the serpent's swaying head, smashing the bones of its hissing face into the coiled breaking bones of its own wet body with the bottom of his shoe, so violently and so many times thereafter that he stood over a weird colloidal pudding of snake leather and pink white and dark red viscera and Wayne thanked him. He stood panting. He was in disbelief that any of it had happened. He nudged the ruined form of the snake away and the patterned leather dragged with it some of the alien offal and he took back up in the grass beside Wayne. Tingling from his shoulders down in cycling threat detection scans that gave to shuddering. He looked at Wayne. The boy was light blue and shivering and his lips looked as if

cloaked with a layer of snow at the contours. Ruggles could not walk home without his friend. He could smell the boy's cologne on himself and it filled him with grief so severe as to be suicidal. The boy had not smelled it. Or he had and it had only made him sad and he had not the energy to comment falsely on it. The boy coughed and searched out Ruggles and Ruggles attended to his frantic eye.

There's. An. Answer. I Swear. You'll See.

What?

Wayne's eye was watching the sky and though it bulged it looked charged with a sort of determined light and he stared into the sky singularly and he repeated himself slowly, and he told Ruggles that he would not always be lonely and Ruggles told him not to go, and Wayne's breathing quickened there and his neck bulged grotesquely with the edgy vertebrae, and he coughed several times and Ruggles clung to him again, and his whole form felt fixed and wooden there and Ruggles clung weeping to his hardening little friend who closed his eyes for the last time and breathed his last breath and shook under his blanket subtly and Ruggles clung weeping to him in the lonely daylight, birds chirping about and scattering through the aluminum sky and swinging about in formation. The boy had asked him if he was a bird. Ruggles clutched him weeping at full strength, knowing life had left his body and he could not will himself away from this young friend of his, nor could he believe himself living a life where this little black criminal jester never spoke to or tempted him again, and he wept with all of his weight on the dead boy, and the sky was massive and it vaulted above them in endless metallic blue indifference. He did not wish to go forward without the boy. And he called on God for it be so. He felt his hunger and his fatigue and the withdrawal of his medicine and he willed himself to die there, as well, clutching the boy, for there was nothing in going forward that motivated him otherwise at this moment, and he set to shaking the boy's stiffening body violently to wake him, and its light form shifted weirdly and something clicked inside him under the blanket into more brokenness and Ruggles hugged him again weeping and apologizing. Wayne's eyes were closed when he came up and his face in such a calm as Ruggles had not never seen it, as the boy might have looked asleep. He fell in the grass beside him again, gnashing wildly, weeping into and tearing at the grass weirdly.

Wayne.

There was no answer. He sat up. He looked at his friend's face.

Wayne. Please. Get up.

He began yelling this and the boy's face would not move and he backed away a little and neared the snake's remains, and he remembered this and scrambled up wiping at his pants, watching the boy and yelling his name, and he wouldn't get up and Ruggles knew he would not, and the world tilted wildly as he stood in his weakness, and he fell to his knees beside Wayne again. He shook the boy and straddled his broken body at the stomach and slapped his face hard and he would not wake, and he wept over him and stood again and the firmament tilted wildly and he walked up it a bit toward the house across the street and he fell twice in his passage there looking backwards and fell again at the front porch and passed into the darkness and slept on the carpet of the living room in the sunlight like a house cat, and when he woke it was night, and in his blood were hunger and a deep need for his medicine and he moved through the dark house with fear and loneliness all through him and he followed the needs of his body, though within he protested and

gnashed, and he passed out across the street and took up the cans of beans from near the dead boy and he wept again in the doing so, and he passed back across the lane, staggering into the yard, squirrels in chase on the lawn scattering off squeaking and Ruggles oblivious and wheeling through watery vision, and he returned to the house and found a pan in a cabinet in the kitchen and the stove was gas and he found a box of matches in a drawer, and he spun the dial and the element clicked and hissed in colubrine reminescence, and he struck a match and brought it near the hissing ventricle and it awoke with a ring of flames individual and blue like a meeting of small angels, and he slid the pan over the flames and peeled away the lid from the can of beans and let them drop into the pan sizzling, and he shook the pan over the flames and stared absently at the dining room table enshadowed there. The entire house was dark and silent. It smelled of upholstery and potpourri. He stood numb on the kitchen tile. Scant moonlight guiding him. The glow of the stove. The beans began to pop and crackle and he slid the pan away from the heat and swung the dial off, and the flame light vanished, as well, and he fumbled for a spoon in one of the adjacent drawers and stood eating begrudgringly, staring off and crying into the darkest points of the room, calling upon God to appear there. He thought of Wayne saying that Christ was on the Cross still, somewhere else, and he wondered how many days he had been hung and how many days remained, for perhaps Wayne might arise sometime very soon like those glowing eyed saints in Galillee who roamed victorious and martyred in their robes of white with garlands of eucalyptus and gumtree in their hair, fastened with golden clips.

Ruggles ate and grew warm and found that he had been shaking unconciously for some time and this had just ceased, and he drank from the tap directly and it tasted of metal and he dreaded all that lay ahead of him and everything at his back, and there was huge rain suddenly at the window and his best friend lay across the street dead, wearing his little cologne, and Ruggles passed back outside through the droplets sprinting and thundered over to Wayne's body, and saw him there, and scattered the collection of insects off of his blanketed form and his rain specked face, and he picked the boy up and he felt like something wooden and he conveyed him across the rain sprent street inside the house. Ruggles set him down in his blankets in the living room, weeping and clutching the hardened and light ruined creature, setting forever now in his crankled form. Ruggles thought of Candy and how jarring that had been for them. How Wayne had worried that Candy was going to hell for being gay, and Ruggles had assured him that Jesus had little interest in excluding gays from his kingdom. That everyone were sinners. And Wayne took this as if from an authority.

And they had been shaken by Candy's death so but nothing near the total oblivion through which Ruggles now moved, for Wayne was his closest friend. His counter person. He knew that he had drawn almost all of his energy from the boy's weird optimism and lack of surprise at each subsequent calamity, and he did not think he could muster this alone, for things weighed so heavily upon this man that they needed some help bearing. He walked out of the house and slouched through the driving rain with absolute indifference and he went across the street and gathered up the boy's belongings and knapsack, and he began off through the slanting torrent back toward his house. Need overwhelming in him for his medicine, and the whole of the dark universe scattering about him in apparitional provocation, and terrifyingly the world played upon on his central nervous system, and his intellect was in disarray and he cared not, and grief filled him, and he walked so weakly along the roads slapping through the pouring rain as to be

essentially stumbling the entire way, rain dashing off him, soaked, and lightning quaking on the skyline in enormous white blue flashes, cracking mutely across the wicked grey storm clouds above, and he did not care that he was wet, and as he walked he sloshed in his shoes and he wore the boy's bookbag and he wandered along weeping aloud, forgotten by the world, and so, too, this youth, whom he had not known he had loved with all of his heart. This youth's crippling and death had exacted such grief upon Ruggles that he could not conceive going forward, and he fell to the ground near the curb on the sloping road, bringing his mouth to the running rainwater and drinking freely from it where it rushed down the stone nook, and he staggered up and knew he had to take his medicine and bury the boy and that was all he knew for now, and he was trying to keep it that way, but found he that could not. That there would an evening tomorrow without Wayne. A morning without him. That his ventures for foodstuffs and tobacco, almost entirely raided out with the exception of one gas station convenience store and one pharmacy in his town, which he every time expected to be raided, but was not. No Wayne sliding across the register's workspace possessively as if it were his own and disappearing beneath. He wondered if he was to blame for Wayne's death. They were in emergent circumstances and he was older and he had allowed the boy to do something dangerous and the boy had died, and he accepted this as if it were axiomatic and endured all the associate gnawing guilt, though Wayne was much the age of maturity enough for the purposes of being accountable for his actions.

Ruggles stumbled upon the roadside weeping. A white van passed at his left through the flecking moonlight, dashing up water, and he could not believe this at first and the man slowed in the dark of the car and Ruggles could hardly see through his tears and the ran the man behind the glowing console with a goatee and glasses and the man eyed Ruggles weirdly as he passed and Ruggles eyes were soaked and the man's tires scattered rain everywhere in a fan that rose up and slapped hard against Ruggles, already drenched, and Ruggles waved maniacally at the man and the man's face did not change and he drove on and Ruggles carried on through the rain, somewhat in disbelief as to the reality of the van. He assumed that other parts of town were perhaps still operative and then felt much the more to blame that he had not gone seeking help, and he nearly collapsed with grief having encountered this car some mile or so from Wayne's body, but at the same time understood the boy was ruined, the way the spine shew through the side of his neck in hideous poking forms like the exoprint of some kind of embedded and horned reptile, and he wept and carried on and watched the carlights recede into black on the horizon and he passed into a valley at the road's side and turned into his neighborhood, regarding the unmended wave of blacktop that curled up from the highway in defiant and liquid curvature. He thought of Wayne looking back at him from the resultant hole. He could not do this, he believed. He very much did wish with the most earnest parts of his heart to die there in the street, staggering unseen and unloved, and God would not, it seemed, and he bore his tortured crying form forward like a cross unto itself and entered his home without Wayne for the first time again. It was dark and, once inside, soaking wet, he slacked the drenched clothes and thes sloshing shoes from him frantically, freezing, and ran barefoot and nude up the three stairs into the dark of his room to fumble for his medication and clothing. He swallowed the pills dry in his closet, fumbling with the several bottles. He swallowed three of them subsequently without water there in the dark and he pad his way to the upstairs bathroom and drank freely from the sink, and though it taste of iron or blood he cared not, and cared not what poisons coarsed through these rusting watery

pathways into his body. So cold was he to the marrow of his bones that he dressed in several layers and wore long johns under his pants. He stood in the dark of his bedroom filled with heartache and loneliness. It was too much to do alone. He must be going to die soon, he reckoned, and he felt some relief in this and passed downstairs to gather up tobbacco and cobble together something reckonable in the dark, and he thought of Wayne's hands working mechanically and narrow along the conical blunts he would roll, and he could not bring himself to reckon with this loss and he thought while smoking in the kitchen that perhaps by the time he returned tomorrow Jesus will have finished his tenure of the crucifix and the living world will be saved as according to prophecy, and Wayne will perhaps rise, entirely mended.

Griefs such as this have killed men in shadowy rooms far warmer than Ruggle's surroundings but he bore them cursed and watched the moon through the window smoking, thinking of Wayne's fear of hell and praying feverishly within him that Wayne was spared in the event that the fates are dealt so cruelly. A poisonous black tsunami. A cobra fanning and rising up. He could not walk home alone.

XXVII

The boy became wild not very long after the man's departure east. He spent much of the time in the cell of the cage rubbing his nakedness against the snake, writhing upon the iron barred floor beside the hissing serpent, growling, the two creatures occasionally fighting things out as equals. The man looking on boredly through the rearview mirror. The van passed along the highway untroubled by other commuters, and the man glanced in the mirror and ordered the boy to the bars of the cage and the boy sniffed at the air hearing his name and went grunting to the bars, agitated and half mute, and he stood clutching the cage and the man threw a handful of M&M's over his shoulder and they clattered lightly across the back and upon the boy, and greedily he let these fall upon him in the cage and fell to gathering them up and sitting in the corner eating them like a chimp and grunting and hissing possessively at the snake. The man in the red robe held a pale finger out from his cloth indicating an exit onto a parallel counterhighway and the man obeyed, and the cloaked man spoke to the man driving telling him secrets of the world and making promises to him in a croaking voice and the bodies of his victims thrummed in hell mechanically screaming and clattering from burning surface to burning surface, their worm undying, and the man smiles and drives, and the boy takes up tousling with the snake again, and the man drives on monomaniacally at the order of his own master, to follow the nigger to wherever to he could discern using the nigger's cell phone, and his faith in his master hoarse words, and he would not turn out of respect though he imagined his master's face, pale and beautiful, long white hair like perfect snow, and he told his master this and the man in the red cloak said nothing and moved to the back of the vehicle with the boy where he took him up in his folds and when the boy emerged again from the folds he was senseless and bleeding from the mouth and he looked vicious and retarded, and he was returned to the cage where he brought his mind in this format to meeting with the snake and they tangled dangerously for some time, and the boy grew sedate and fell asleep for sometime and woke up with the man presenting him with clothes and a chocolate milk with a tranquilizer in it, and the boy dressed uncertainly and the man brought him from the front passenger door out of the van into a motel in Arkansas, and they walked together through the open air passageway before a hundred doorways and the man carried the snake stuffed hugely and jerking wildly in a small cat kennel he kept in the back of

the van, and the man told the boy he was doing a good job and they passed unseen into the room. The motel itself seemed hardly operative, and the boy stumbled and grunted weirdly as he followed the man's khaki legs into the carpeted room. The door closed at his back and the boy undressed at once without being told and walked over and stood tapping the television and grunting at the man and the man turned the television on and ordered a pornographic film and the boy stood in front of the screen watching it as if in religious epiphany and the man watched him from the bed and abused his loins and he let the snake roam free throughout the maroon carpet at the boy's feet, and it slid about flickering its tongue out at the odor of cigarettes and aerosol deodorizer, and the man prepared the bathtub for worship and this would be the first time the boy would see the miracle itself occur, and he abused himself there for some time before going to the bathroom and filling the tub with warm water. The man hunched out of the bathroom and scanned the floor for the snake. The boy did not heed him and stood at the television. It played loudly. The man walked behind the boy, naked now himself, and he did fetch up the snake on the far side of the bed and wrangle it wrestling weirdly against him into the tub, where submerged in the warm fluid it uncurled back and forth through the rippling and steaming water. The man bent and guided the boy from the television by the small of his back to the bathtub and the boy pulled away and growled violently and returned fixed to the television, and the man was pleased with this but he led him again and the boy obeyed, and he told him he was doing a good job, and the boy no longer thought of school or his mother or father, and the man conveyed the boy into the tub with the snake and he took up hunched on the toilet opposite, pulling at the small of his back and abusing himself, watching the boy's murderous eyes spin about the waters watching the snake. The dark naked child there, lowering himself into the water, and the man began lecturinf to him. Telling him the earth itself is but a particle in a great dark will that spans the endless universe. The snake rose up out of the water, and water ran from its face sideward, and it lunged at the boy and he hissed at it, and they thrashed in the waters for sometime. The man disembarked his hunched naked position on the toilet and calmed them in the waters. He went on.

That a man who masters the material world, might master, too, an invisible world. That a man who follows a certain sequence might spur awake in the dark regions of his hindbrain the very will to evolve, that he might awake this gland to glorious life in his singular person, and that having begun down this path already, he had acquired somewhat of a tail and he told the boy that wings were to follow and that he knew a man, a great man, who had stood on a mountain in the thunder and called out against God, bearing a great alloyed sceptre up to the lightning and the wind and rain fell away from him, and he trod down the mountain victorious with his metallic orb-handled staff. He is a man who has lived a thousand lives. He told the boy that the man who masters the material earth understands that the ultimate will and orientation of the material earth toward humans at present is a murderous one, and that for only one man in history has nature so unfolded as to accommodate the shifting tides of revelation, and it reeled in for this man its wild and disparate array of deadly elements that weaken and kill without effort, and allowed him to live ensconced away from the dumb masses and the sleet and the winds. He told the boy again, glowing, that his master was this person. And he told the boy again that the having of a master is no humiliation. Nor is it something a man ought to believe himself subjugated by. This is the notion of the man of who is misled. Or the man who takes his pathetic master in the interrupted

and ultimately failed spectacle of Jesus. Whose very existence demonstrated that a facility with and access to all the powers and knowledge of the heavens cannot overcome the frenzied machinations of the creatures of the material earth. He told the boy that his master was very fond of him and the boy heard that the man was speaking in gratified tones so he repeated the behavior he was engaged at present which was writhing weirdly and entoning nonsensically, sweeping about the warm waters with the snake. The man spent himself watching and entered the tub. The snake swept over to his side and the man draped the serpent across him and it hissed and flicked its tongue out at the dark boy on the other side of the tub. The boy watched, silent now and drooling. He put his hand in his mouth. The man began his incantations and the boy's hand fell away and his mouth did drop slackly open in awe when the man's master did materialize there before them, bedraped in crimson to preside over their worship in the tub.

The man worshipped, and the snake lay slack across him leisurely and evil, and the boy did look down and some moments later find himself in a bath of unsourced blood and he watched the man drink eagerly from it, lain naked on his side with serpent, and the man ceased his slurping for a moment and bade the child do the same, and the child bent and took to lapping at the blood like a dog on the edge of a pond, and soon he drunk in frenzy, as well, in the manner of his new master. Small growling postulant, arms wobbling about like a small chimpanzee as he totters, dragging through the viscous blood toward his master, climbing on his form and draping across the man where the snake was not like some relieved and understood initiate.

XXVIII

Drano and Waffle moved through the largely abandoned Virginia like early surveyors, casting out in the direction of their mutual needs, as if moving through darkness toward distant points of lights. On foot, they behaved like pigeons. They swept across the curving landscape enshrouded by trees, and Drano drove as if from instinct through the diminishing gradients of activity throughout the state, until activity and populace effectively ceased altogether upon reaching Ruggle's city. They took up in a house not some three miles from Ruggles own, set deep in the woods off of a winding backroad. An estate of sorts. It was not shuttered. They parked the car and got out and surveyed the mansion and its surroundings. The moon shew fully in the sky above them and they could hear the entangled sound of frogs croaking and crickets chirping from the surrounding forest. Together, they slouched along through moonligh and grass, following the perimeter of the mansion. The wind nudged them softly along from the hind, and it smelled of wet stone and it smelled of rain and pitch. They passed back to the front of the mansion again curving along the opposite side of the house, Drano running his left hand along the cool stone masonry there of the mansion as they walked. There was a circle of boxwoods on the rolling front lawn that came into view blackly before them like the silhouette of some terrible esbat. Witches gathered in a circle entoning. Fire there dancing wildly and dumbly at their center. Drano rubbed his eyes. Flickering highway lines for days had etched something in his visual field that needed sleeping off and his kidneys ached, and he stood among the variously shaped furs of the lawn and the topiary like a huge pigeon and Waffle nudged him and asked how he wanted to enter and Drano started walking again to the front door and Waffle took up astride him.

The massive oak door glistened in the evening light like some kind of monolith, and it was enframed by bilateral panes of blue-opaque damask-patterned glass, and Drano ran his hands along this liquid border and pivoted and sloped away from the grand white columnated entry back to the car, with Waffle standing on the porch looking wearily about him like some hypervigilant parvenu. Drano snatched the tire iron up from its grooved compartment in the trunk and he strode across the lawn objectively, as if this breaking of glass was an act of some kind of secret inauguration, and he padded dead-eyed through the wind up the alabaster stone stairs and Waffle followed him with his eyes, and he told Waffle to stand back and he did bash through that tessellated glass on the door's handle side, and it shattered magnificently from the top down like a miniature glass avalanche, and the forest quietened with this sudden and huge crystallien and tinking clatter, and shards flecked against Drano's shut eyes and he stepped blindly backwards as the sheet slide down and catch and fall clear of the frame.

When he opened his eyes, Waffle was already at the door, reaching in through the broken frame and undoing the locks with his left hand. They entered. Shadows so engulfed them in the towering darkness there as to give each the unpleasant impression of being under cold dark water. The floors were white marble and they glistened like burnished ivory and there was no dust upon them and they stood there as if on a sheet of pure glacial ice with the moonlight above them and their watery shadows. The stairs at the landing were double curved and they sloped up in mirrored opposition, curving and white carpeted the color of swans, and these stairs, as well, did wrap their necks about one another at the landing. There was an enormous antique chandelier of pure imported German crystal, with arms of solid bronze with gold gilding, and it hung above them prismatically and nigh medieval, communicating the moonlight in ephemereal reds and greens and blues and deep bright whites. Waffle looked at Drano.

We finna pick rooms?

Yeah.

Waffle watched Drano drink carefully from a brown opaque pint bottle of codeine syrup and return it to the breast pocket of his jacket. He looked a man absolutely haunted.

You good?

Drano stared off into the darkness. He looked to Waffle. Nigga, I don't even know if we should be here.

This spot? What, you think it's hot or some shit?

No, nigga. I mean, across the fucking country. My fucking mama is dead. My baby mama. Panda is missing. Like, a nigga should be there. There, looking for him. Killing niggas for answers if that's what it takes.

Waffle rubbed his chin and nodded his head. You know if we go back they just gon' lock our asses up for good, and they gon' be on you. Off the back, they gon' be on you. Ahab said these niggas think you did it. Nigga, you are not going to be able to do shit for Panda from a jail cell.

They stood in the dark.

I can't ever go back, Drano said seriously, looking Waffle in the eyes as they stood in the yellow cascade of the master bedroom, starlight at the windows the color of sheep's wool. Drano looked at Waffle again in the eyes.

I'm never going back to jail. Ever.

Nigga, if you try to slide back through California right now. You are going to jail.

I know, Drano said. I know.
So what we finna do? Waffle asked.
Flock everything.
The fuck did everyone go?
I don't care, nigga, Drano said.
Nigga is going to care if everyone took their cash and jewelry. And lean.
They sloped down the duelling stairs in mirror parallel and splashed across the milk of the marble at the landing, and dark birds gathered on a pattern of stones in the rolling front yard launched at the men's approach through the grass, and seen from afar they looked like two limping shadows, gathering up more darkness and conveying it dutifully into the glimmering and pristine mansion. The men put up their belongings in moonlight in their two elected bedrooms on the second floor and Drano arranged his pills and his latest pharmacy take on a dresser there, and he felt coarsing through him almost adrenally the will to keep driving. It was like some unwelcome vigour passing through him in the vaulting onyx host of the mansion, and he could see the burnished wood glisten on the dresser, and he took two pills from the bottle and washed them down with a soda, a number of which they had lifted a county or so before reaching the estate. He stood breathing in the bedroom. The carpet was vaccuumed so freshly that the elongate path of the sucking machine resembled a lovely ruffling like white feathers laid counter to one another across the floor of the bedroom. He shuffled over and drew apart the curtains all the way, and from among the trees below appeared some form, across the vast plane of the back yard it wandered weirdly and distorted, and he walked from the window and this restlessness in him did whir dreadfully, and he was seen in blackened lucubration by Waffle from the hallway, a great and brooding beastly shadow stood upon the stooped white wing of a bird. Waffle entered the room and Drano turned around and nodded without speaking.
Nigga, your hands are tied. Both our hands are tied.
Nigga. It's just. A lot.
They gonna find Panda, bro. He probably ended up at your auntie's or some weird shit.
Nah, nigga. It ain't like that. Shit never shakes out in that direction for me.
They stood in silence for some time and Waffle withdrew a moment later without a word and Drano felt warmth gathering slowly like glittering sparks in his marrow and his breath slackened and his eyes, too, and he fell upon the bed fully clothed and he stared at the ceiling for some three minutes before dropping off into sleep deep into the next afternoon.

Drano woke in withdrawal everyday, and this sluggish and sunlit afternoon was no different. He reached consciousness deleriously and drenched with sweat. Coming awake in the sunlit room to an alien chatter of birdlife soaring in from the air of the backyard, passing so plentifully and imbricating through the partially opened bedroom windows as to seem frenzied and urgent and personal. Wind flitting dried and fallen leaves along. Boughs swaying, making winding sounds. These tremulous acoustics pirouetted on the direct tips of Drano's half-awake nerve endings with an incomprehensible and unpleasant gravity. There in strewn sheets, in a wash of yellow slack sunlight, Drano could not, for several struggling minutes, understand where it was he had just awoken, or how he had gotten there, or why. And he lay for some moments in the cold soaked outfit he had slept in and similarly dampened sheets, glancing nervously at the closed door, as if

it might come alive, and he lay for sometime this way in a delerium until gradually his mind restored him to every hideous detail of his life. He slipped out of the raveled and damp bedding and passed shivering in a transfer of sweat to the gilded wooden dresser on the southern wall, lurching along in the clothes he slept in with his hands clasped beneath his trembling chin like a mad man walking the streets and praying. Drano took up and sipped generously from a two-pint dispensation sized brown bottle of codeine syrup there, and he stood shuddering and blinking before the mirror regarding his huge black countenance and sweatsoaked form with something like horror. The light bent in bizarre pearlescent flexure against the mirror and boomeranged back toward the window at Drano's back. Birds unseen behind him made small shrieking calls like monkeys across the estate's backyard. The room smelled of his sweat. Which smelled of metabolites of cough syrup. Drano opened the top drawer of the dresser in the sweeping crude manner that a large bear might and he took therefrom another wholesale sized plastic vessel of opioids. He could hear Waffle moving around in the house. He shook four small green circular tablets into his large pale palm from this bottle, and these he washed back with another viscious tip of the cough syrup, and he fell staggering backwards towards the bed, as if pulled by ropes there, and he pulled the slack, wet covers away and so, too, did he cast off the wet clothes he had slept in. Cold and slaked with toxic sweat. He entered the bed and lied there on the topsheet beneath the cool dry comforter. The linens smelled of rosewater and washing detergent, and he could now smell cannabis burning in a vanilla cigar and his condition was gradually becoming him like a sunrise, and, after some time spent huddled and shivering under the blankets, he felt warmth and precision moving smoothly through his person and his thoughts, and the relief carried him out of the bed and he dressed from the garbage bag of clothing, lamenting the loss of showers, and shuffled out of the room, spirit embracing and restrained. Eyes swollen and squinnied.

Drano and Waffle spent the next twelve days burglarizing most of the nearby homes, returning them to their shuttered condition upon finishing, often hiding away broken windows and doors this way. So freely did they move through this counter landscape that the men used the walkie talkies and worked on separate houses at the same time, yet still they scanned their horizons compulsively and glanced over their shoulders as often as their instinct commanded, but less weightily did they do this, having seen not yet one person since entering the Gehessen county lines.

Based on their take so far, it seemed that many left without their stored away cash and jewelry, their contents of their safes, and the rolling front lawn of the mansion and topiary slowly became like some odd museum of pried open safes. As if they fell freely from the sky in that part of the earth alone. Oddly, the estate held almost nothing of value outside of its furnishings. They drift through the shadowy and collosal mansion like a poltergeist in mitosis.

Waffle woke on the twelfth day and he found Drano awake downstairs in the kitchen, staring out the window at the lush green backyard, birds shuttling warmly through the expansive peacock formations of creeping vines and fleshy celodon succulents and golden pink flowers, all of these blossoming wildly there. He gazed through the spears of sunlight that swept down into the garden and watched blankly as the translucent fanning of insect wings ascending and descending over the grass, passing into and out of visibility through various pronunciations of sunlight. Waffle stood at the threshhold of the kitchen regarding Drano uncertainly. He had not yet said a

word. Drano was never awake before Waffle. Waffle knew he woke up in withdrawal everyday and that he slept as deep as death before this, and as long as possible in avoidance of this, and he had nearly startled at initially seeing him there in the kitchen, mistaking him for a glimmer for some kind of intruder. Waffle sloped into the kitchen and came astride Drano at the counter.

What choo doing up, nigga?

I woke up at like, five, nigga. I couldn't go back to sleep. A nigga is dying.

Well nigga we working today?

Yeah. Yeah.

Waffle watched Drano work in the sunlight, holding aloft a small bottle of codeine syrup to the sun as if for an offering, and tilting it with care over a similarly raised bottle of lemonade and the syrup ran purple and stringy into the dayglow yellow fluid and it branched arterially and skeined, and Drano tilted more in and it slipped silken and purple through the clear plastic aperture, and he set the pint on the counter and conveyed the respective lids to each bottle. He flipped the lemonade and the stringy constellation of blood went vacuuming upward in a wash of carbonation, blushing and solving. Birds chittered and clicked across a glittering stone patio the kitchen led out to as if breadcrumbs had been thrown there, and Waffle went up to this door and frowned down at them from his waking murk and they did not heed him. A heron stood grey and solemn at the end of the lawn with one leg lifted, eyes cloaked in the penumbra laid by the encircling trees. It did not move. There were stone rabbits in the garden, nigh overgrown, their blind eyes barely visible still in waveform growth. A birdbath gleamed opalescently in its stone whiteness in the center of the backyard, and the greening waters therein did glisten similarly in the lemony spring sun. The men watched for sometime both wordless as the sun sustained there the color of fire and gently wheeling down to earth and through the glass onto their forms, alighting slowly each man's dark visage. Drano took a half-pint bottle from where he had stashed it in the kitchen cabinet and he conveyed it into the breast pocket of his jacket. He was wearing a coat of blue velvet with crystal buttons. It was embroidered across its lengths with cats in a Japanese style and there was the heiroglyphic writing of that language thereupon writ in glittering white string upon the sleeves, as well. He wore jeans of a complicated pattern that had been stylistically torn and resewn down the length of the legs and they were the color of the blue ocean, splashing foam, and his shoes were leopard print and their soles were red. Waffle dressed in his own fashion, likewise, for the men had not been wearing masks and black garments for the past few days, taking the entire town for abandoned, and they some kind of new settlers surveying the abandoned wares of some former peoples.

Waffle was wearing a blue and black plaid flannel shirt that buttoned to his throat and ran the length of his arms and his green hair was black rooted now, like green mold on black mold. He looked kind and tired, and he wore red denim pants and red sneakers. Waffle told Drano he had to piss and then he would be ready to go, and Drano sloped out of the kitchen across the sparkling sunlit marble floors dazzling so in the sunlight as if slats cut and burnished from the bones of gods themselves. The great flowering expressions of black in the sheer rock like the scorchings of their martyred skeletons. He passed into light and warmth and floated out over the lawn. He levitated beside the car, the sun merging with his matter in a sort of material and activating manner. Smoking a cigarette and squinting into the sunlight and the warmth. Birds chirping and whistling all about him. He flickered his eyes wildly about him at these creatures,

seen and unseen. A moment later, Waffle came tumbling out of the house into the bright green landscape and he staggered through the sunlight like a fatigued apparition to the glistering chrome sedan. Drano flicked his cigarette and floated down and watched the cashed end of it go flipping across the lawn towards the safes, the variously shaped animorphic and cubic and spherical bushes growing out of their forms back to ambiguity, and he turned and opened the driver's door and swept into the seat. Waffle, as well.

They swept along through the early afternoon with no thoughts between them clouded. The sun shone so radiantly upon them through the windshield that they were alit as if divinity itself had opened up some direct passage to them. Waffle crumbled his mossy flowers on his lap and spun his cone of cannabis, and bubbled along creamily in the passenger seat, slunk low and eyes suspicious through the bog, mystery all about them, like some green haired creature emerging from the watery suck of a fog strewn swamp. They followed Drano's circle inward and passing so they passed along wooded slopes, where cypress and oak knuckled out in century old boughs that knotted over the road. And they went hurtling through a tunnel of cherry blossom trees wherefrom a thousand blood clotted petals unlatched pinkly and exploded confetti like in their wake. Drano watched the pale petals spin mutely in the rearview mirror. Waffle looked over at him.

That white nigga on the walkie talkie is funny as fuck.

That nigga's a felon.

"I can't leave the state," Waffle said in a mock caucasoid voice.

Drano laughed. That nigga got left behind.

That nigga got left for dead out here, nigga. There ain't shit. You think that nigga got a car?

No. Maybe. A nigga more than enough cars to choose from if he want to steal one. Walk to a dealership or some shit.

Nigga did say he on probation, though, Drano, Waffle attempted in a serious tone.

They broke up in laughter. Sunlight flooded through the crystalline windscreen and the trees about them were all outfitted in brilliant greens and yellows and reds like huge tattered umbrellas, and through the rippling and fragrant wind they could smell warmed creekwater and honeysuckle and they passed along their roadway path like two flecks of dust through a strobe of light, glancing and effulgent.

They reached the neighborhood they had left the night before, and Drano curved along the lane, tablets thick in his blood now glowing soft green in his veins and the syrup swimming in amneotic coolness about his once fevered brain. Waffle could see it in his eyes. Drano in precision now. Drano smiling, eyes bunching shut in his huge head with the sunlight at his back somewhere. Arms crossed high. Drano looked to Waffle and flicked his chin at a yellow two-story house with shuttered door and windows.

Was that the last one we hit?

Yeah. The yellow piece.

Drano, out of allegiance to craft, then backtracked concentrically outward along the circle and parked some blocks away, in the driveway of a house in the same neighborhood. They cut through the yards in sunlight, maskless and leisurely. They had accumulated a small fortune in cash and jewelery, though each man silently held in him the reckoning that these things might no longer be of any value. That their very presence in these homes perhaps spoke to that.

They passed whisking through long grass where bicycles lay slowly enswarmed by grass in the sunlight, the spokes glinting with white light still beneath the creeping greenery. They were in the backyard of the yellow house. There was a fountain of white stone there where a small nude boy was chiseled in a position of permanent micturation above now a dried out bowl of scooped alabaster rock. Drano and Waffle stood there in the sun, and both men did check and secure tbeir pistols and walkie talkies and knapsacks and they moved through the grass toward the street like phantoms. Drano slouched along squinting and swatting amongs the gnats, remembering the inside of the yellow house last night. He did not understand. The entire house was normal and lived in, and even quite nice, except the master bedroom was grotesquely cloaked with dust, as if it had been made up at the construction of the house and left shut since some many decades before. So thick was the miasma and blanket of dust upon the furnishings and things therein that when Drano swung open the bedroom door, for the briefest moment in the dying light, he believed the room to be infested with swirling flies or some insect. They passed through the room with cloths from the kitchen drawers to their nose, and they found nothing of value. There was part of a human skull in one of the drawers and the form was clear, though it not complete. The men stood staring at it, and confirming its identity as such between one another, Drano dropped it on the floor and they left the house immediately, both men shuddering as they refastened the shutters. Some dark magick therein. Some curse, some cancer.

Their craft was quick work now. The men would use stolen power drills to quickly unfasten the shuttering over a window or door, and break into the home through that aperture. Upon leaving the home, they would fasten it back upon. Drano did not know why but he insisted that they did this, and so they each took the short time after throwing a house to return the removed slat to the door or window they had broken in through.

They stood surveying the next two houses in the line. They were about sixty yards apart, on account of a curve in the neighborhood lane. Drano asked Waffle if he had a preference of the one on the right or the left and he shrugged and said none, and Drano told him to take the house on the right, and to use the walkie talkie. Waffle nodded and set off.

Drano passed across the street to the next house. It was a dark blue two story Gothic style home with a conical portion of roof beside the chimney, upon which a few mockingbirds tittered and flicked. The yard was overgrown with onion grass and vines and bushes of pure green spectra, all of these commingling with the crawling vectors of waxen and bright ivy sliding up the brick siding of the house along an arrangement of wooden trellises. Greenery curling up about the spherical portion of the architecture. There was a single bald cypress tree in the yard and clumps of spanish moss hung from it like boas or pelts hung for drying along the boughs. The tawny branches cast a wild swimming shadow with a thousand arms and a thousand tendrils upon the grass. Drano passed ducking under these flocculent ribbons draping down from the dark umber boughs. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Waffle shrinking in the distance away from him across the lane towards a shuttered white two-story Georgian style house with dark black shingles whose granular stone scintillated in the sunlight. Everything smelled of grass. Of trees. A house further down the lane still had positioned in its riptide of overgrown grass huge inflated lawn ornaments of a snowman and a Christmas tree and a Santa, and these rippled and sagged in the soft breeze. There was a brindled grey cat sitting in the shadow of the Christmas tree. Drano could see the angular outline of its verterbrae poking out in a grotesque and descending

exhibition of feline hunger, as if a series of small gargoyles sat along the arc and slope of the cat's form. The walkie talkie chirped statically in Drano's pocket. He withdrew it standing at the front door.
Testing.
Got you, Drano said. Over.
Aiight.
Say over, nigger. Over.
Over.
Drano rolled his eyes and set his bag down and his bottle of soda and he withdrew the power drill from the knapsack and brought it up and studied the door. He withdrew four screws at the corners of this massive fragrant sheet of plywood and it tilted back into his hands, warm and rough, and he guided it to the ground of the porch and worked upon the door next. He withdrew the flathead from his back pocket and shifted it in and shimmied it until the lock fell, and the door frame was cracked about his anglings, and he entered the house. So dark was it, with the barest fenestrated outline of light creeping in, it was almost as if he was in a place built of dark blankets alone, and he took his flashlight from the bag and flicked it on and it scoped out through the house, illuminate rushing specks, and throwing into oblong alabaster horror anything it fell upon. He looked about blinking and a moment later began moving through the dark house quickly, padding up the stairs first. The house smelled of cats and the old yellowing pages of books and Drano moved through the first upstairs bedrooms expertly, removing the pillowcase from the bed and started in on the drawers, the flashlight rolling and creaking on the wooden surface of the chest the only light in the room.
The walkie chirped and the grumbled pronunciation of static was something relatively like an explosion in the darkness of the silent house.
Nigga. This shit weird. This shit put on from, like, inside or something here. All the way around.
Drano breathing in the dark bedroom took the walkie to his face. You have to say over, nigga.
Ruggles was listening from bed.
Over. Nigga. This shit is drilled from inside. Even the front door is outside in. I am looking at the ends of the screws right now. This shit weird as fuck. Over.
So, nigga. Just kick that shit in. Over.
Drano drifted out of this first upstairs bedroom bearing only a pillowcase. It must have been a guest room of sorts, for the drawers held only neatly folded spare teal and pink linens and the closet held only a white linen robe and a clatter of plastic and wooden hangers that swayed undraped by garments in a portal-like triangular sequence into the furthest dark of the closet. Follow the scope of the flashlight now as it chutes out in a perfect dust stippled tunnel and splashes oblong and yellow along the dark grey carpet, dragging leftward and gliding suddenly into the master bedroom. There is dust in this strobe with us, be sure. See how easily the pale light slides, see how easily it tunnels like a golden tubular looking glass through which being does pass in part or in whole, and, now, finally swinging wide then dilating in a great lemony hoop, enshadowed and varied itself as a halved watermelon is seeded, and the master bedroom is enblazed before you in ringed segments of varying shape and size, and the strobe hurtles out in precision and alights upon the paisley green and gold wallpaper slacked up in perfect alignment, and it swings upon and glides across in golden dilation the flowered embroidery of the bed's

comforter and the powder blue netting of a crocheted blanket fitted across the bottom half of the bed, and this speckled cylinder of flaxen light glissades along and there, now, before you, look at the contents of the ventilated bedside table. Reading glasses, ointments, earrings, tissues. See the little frail paired jewelry goldenly dropping into the abyssmal darkness of the pillowcase like lovers in a suicide pact, and the light moves wild now, rolling across the carpet and alighting along the counter wall a psychedelic tableau like the first light of the next world, casting along the gilded wallpaper, and Drano's silhouette comes rushing into this flourescent half dome like a man expelled from heaven, enlarging and monstrous, and, see the mirror, see the flashlight shone upon itself in the mirror as if memorialized there in the vaguely sparkling sheet of reflective aluminum slated there in a half oval over the drawers. We have been set down on the drawers to gaze obliquely at ourselves in this skewed mirror light and the half lemon seeded light ricochets from the mirror and tilts to and fro on the far wall, as Drano lifts the mattress and finds nothing and returns, and once again takes us up in hand, and behold this grand chest here, cased with six sliding drawers, built of hand gilded oak some five decades before by a man now long dead. And so, too, his practice. See where this hand once living pulled clean from the fragrant lumber patterns of leaf and lattice along the mantle, a garden overhang fit for cherubs or nymphs, and see, too, the perfect quatrefoil etched into the face of the drawers themselves. Now, behold, through our tubular efflulgence the contents of the drawers. The wild light trembling on well folded white undershirts and underpants and dress socks of various dark colors as thin as shadows in their knitting. The light swings ceilingward as Drano closes this first drawer and we are thrown glowing into the perforated blade of a basketwoven ceiling fan and translated thereafter into a yellow grid of slanted squares of light along the ceiling, and Drano ventilated the second drawer powerfully and it clinked enormously with metal and jewels therein and he trained his light across the golden and the silver embellishments, the slatted hoops and ornate expressions of precious metal, embedded with diamonds and rubies, glow claret-colored and precariously beside his scattering hand like burning coals in a fire stoked, and Drano holds a necklace whose pendant was embedded with a sizeable diamond in the light and his eyes went wide and hopeful, as if he gazed into a miniature fifty-point bruted crystal ball, and the flashlight passes through it cleanly and ghostly and the diamond glows in the dark cleanly like some small wise eye or the brain of a faerie. Drano dropped this twinkling jewel into the dark of the case like a living spark into a dry bonfire. The light is back compacted now inside the drawer, and so, too, we. There. The back right corner. See it. There is a small black velvet bag there, drawn tight about its neck, with two gold tasselled strings. See the shadowed hand slide past the twinkling emerald lariat and the golden brooch there, freckled with sparklers of blue and white opal, and swim digitally through the clank of precious metal and stone. See the bag open, and now watch as the light tunnels in and pools thereupon the brilliant glowing stones like some kind of revelation of life itself. These thirty or more jewels of perfect water, radiant blue and phosphorescent in the dark bedroom. Silencing the heart of the man holding them entirely.

Drano plucked one of these effulgent stones from the bag and trained the light on it and it glowed cooly and bluely, and he returned it to the small velvet bag almost sacredly, and he shone the light down into the tiny velvet satchel again, as if to make sure it was still real, and actually in his hand, and his eyes gazed down therein and saw something like a cave of living crystals alit with firelight. He whooped out and sent this, along with the rest of the jewelry in the drawer, reeling

into the black depths of the pillowcase. He threw open the other drawers without much expectation, with a feeling that he and Waffle had just perhaps found something forever invaluable and barterable on markets that were lucrative and in no way necessarily official or traceable. He could not estimate how much the bag of diamonds might be priced at fairly, but he imagined, in the event that they were real, that the bag was enough to make the men millionaires, at least considered as a pair.

But let us enter again this tube of squash colored light and tumble eagerly into the remaining drawers like a mouse dropped into a pile of cottonballs. See the elongate monster shadow we cast upon the floor about the drawers, and Drano's heart was filled as he worked as if with the same light of those diamonds and he sorted lazily through the rest of this room, the pillowcase heavy and clinking as he rustled along.

Sorting through the dark, he could hear birds whistling in the branches near the windows and it sounded like water traveling through a cycled arrangement of flutes. He was crossing the landing to a third bedroom, floating almost, when he heard two loud cracks across the street so staggering and sheer across the afternoon sky that Drano did himself duck there on the carpet of the landing and cover his head with his flashlight hand, peeking out through the balustrade. The walkie talkie chirped statically and he heard yelling across the street that was not Waffle's voice and he fled down the stairs like some sandman discovered at work, absconding the home of the potential sleeper with his bag of salts.

He set the bag down running at the foot of the stairs and went crashing out onto the front porch. Glancing from the deck he saw them, Waffle and the Old Man. Waffle on the ground sorting through the ruins of his own abdomen in the grass of the front lawn. The sky wheeling above him in flame blue and cloud freckled panorama. The Old Man lumbering out of the front door, his eyes like portals of white fire, preaching maniacally in his underwear and slippers, pale and gaunt with slack skin, and bearing a long dark shotgun, taking it up before his lined and fleshy rib cage and charging it again with a pump.

He was ranting as he staggered down the lawn towards Waffle, saying, I have seen this foul creature once in a dark dream and there he escaped my clutch, for the fortunes were not with me then in that paralytic limboid realm when we two first met. The fortunes are with me today, see them, glorious about me, the justices adorning me, and Drano heard these words as he passed silently, with the agile and mute steps of an arachnid, across the street and, passing so, he took up with his pistol aimed with both hands from behind a row of boxwoods that partitioned the old man's yard at the property line from the yellow house. The Old Man did not see his passage or position. He was only a few feet from Waffle now and looking insanely down at him and up at the heavens alternately, preaching electrically, his spare white hair wild and whipping in a breeze all of his own, as if invisible chariots raced past him at all sides. Drano thought the man would not shoot Waffle dead there on the lawn. Drano watched as Waffle moved his hands away from his abdomen, and bloodsoaked he stretched his dark liquid arm across the grass for the walkie talkie, some distance from his hand up the lawn. Next to it a few feet up in the grass was Waffle's pistol. Drano watched his friend's hand sliding in helpless insufficience, and he hesitated for a moment and looked again and the man was standing over Waffle with his arms aloft in a mudra of insane prayer, sanctifying Yaweh's justice. This act perhaps inaugurating in the Old Man's kaleidoscopic dementia the dawn of some new age of justice, at the fore of which he now stands

giving his inaugural address, and Drano hesitated again but then stepped leftward into the street clear of the boxwoods and the Old Man's wild glowing eyes swung about in hearing and he looked absolutely deranged in Drano's direction and the oiled dark steel of the twinned barrel did glint once in the sun and the Old Man shot and Drano felt something like a metereor shower of candescent metal spheres pass scorching over his right shoulder. He returned fire, the large caliber bullets sliding clean and goldtipped through the afternoon air like microscale missiles and the Old Man's neck was a sudden bulbous expansion of fanning blood and gargled breath, and he staggered back some on the lawn, eyes insane with surprise, putting a hand to his ruined neck, still ranting and gurgling rabidly through the torn and flapping flesh there, eyes wild like cold burning stars in his white bearded face, and stumbling down on the lawn in drowning and suffocation, the Old Man, in a final act of defiance, slung the shotgun nigh up under his armpit with his right arm, holding his torn throat with the left hand, and he steadied the wooden body against his side, below his rib cage, and he did discharge the double barrelled shotgun not three feet from Waffle's green mane, all of this in a monent, and when the vaporous grey black smoke cleared from the lawn Waffle's head was simply gone and Drano saw this, and through a silent roar he did start down the glimmering blue neighborhood lane toward the Old Man, shooting eight more times consecutively and sending the Old Man's pale grey corpus to strange contortions on the lawn that resembled something like a junior ventriloquist's first warming movements, and standing over this man, in silence and static, he did shoot him through the face, in return, the 5.7mm bullet dismasting the man's skull at once back upon the lawn. Brains all through the rimey grass in the front yard of this house. Trees all bare of birds, departed invisibly at the first pronouncement of the shotgun. This scene of horror. Others inside. Maybe. Crazy old man shuttered up. Drano stumbled over to Waffle's headless form. He wretched. His body was ringing. It was as if those steel orbs hung steadily over his shoulder, so clearly could he feel the swarming metal still whooshing past. Six inches to the left, it would have taken his head clean off, as well. How was he standing so. Quartz glittering in the pavement like a fossilized wave beneath him in the sun. Bloodspecked. Standing over Waffle, he saw his friend had first sustained a hole bore straight through his stomach with buckshot, the size of which a squirrel could jump through easily, before the Old Man dispatched his unique head out of cognizable existence forever. Drano kept trying to look for his face and forgetting. It was silent. It was roaring. The Old Man dead and torn apart by bullets on the lawn, bloodsoaked in his underwear, as white as the moon. Like something that came wildly clutching out of a graveyard through the raw pink afternoon. Drano stood in the light looking down at Waffle's outfit. The shot had been executed so closely to Waffle's head that, even passing downward through his skull and ambient brain matter, the seering metal spheres had melted and tore through the thick solid gold cuban links at his neck, and they sat piled on either side of his shoulder steaming and hissing in the grass there. Drano felt insanity overcoming him and he swung around and threw his wrist up with the FN and shot the Old Man again twice and the old body bore the bullets bluntly, with sucking sounds, and his corpse convulsed twice and Drano felt tears welling in his eyes there in the daylight, presiding over these murders. This friend with whom he would never speak again, or see smirking slying from a roil of a smoke, and Drano stood a man on a landscape without a center and without destination, and he walked across the lawn with his eyes hardened into the house in the hopes of finding more persons associated with the murder of his friend to hold

responsible, and the FN had an extended clip, allowing thirty-three bullets, and he held this outright as he entered as if conversation itself was forgone on this matter for anyone proximal to this Old Man.

The house was well lit with oil lanterns, newspapers everywhere, a rocking chair in the living room, a radio, wooden floors and a Moroccan print red and gold, a fire going in the fireplace, cans of food everywhere. He slanted into the kitchen with the gun out before him at extension and a cat stepped out of the shadows at his left and he shot it dead through the head without intending to and did not regard it again and he swung around, as if provoked by his own gunfire, and found no one, and he moved through the downstairs begrudgingly, searching the Old Man's effects and simultaneously disgusted by all of them. The Old Man, it seemed, had been hoarding what appeared to be a near grocery store's worth of dry and canned goods. He had them accumulated to such an extent that they were stacked nigh to the ceiling throughout his kitchen and lower hallways. Cereals, beans, flour, soups, maple syrup, cornbread packs.

Drano passed room to room with the pistol up before him like a fin cutting through dark waters, passing in and out of shadow, corridor to room, room to corridor. Orange light outlining the shuttering. Waffle was right. The man had shuttered himself in. The door included. Drano passed out of the kitchen in the same murderous quality and went along through the central hallway to the broken front paneling again. He studied the remaining shutter. It was almost as if the man had tilted or duct taped the shuttering boards in place before securing them from within using six-inch screws that passed through the entire doorjamb outward, spinning and finding the board. Securing it likewise at four corners. It stood cored through and broken in half with the first shot, as if a huge rock had been thrown clean through the wood there, snapping the lengths above and below. Sunlight trickling in through the frayed and jagged cloven board. Drano shook his head and descended to the basement. He stood at the top of the stairs and there below him sat a heavy pool of pure eigengrau about six stairs down. All was static. All was distortion. He still held the flashlight in his left hand, and he sent the strobe sparking down through the thick penumbra cylindrically and he descended, and the wooden stairs were dusty and they creaked with his weight, and the basement air was damp and earthy, and the flashlight slid obloid across the black stained and spiderwebbed stone walling, and it smelled of wet stone and mildew. The secret squeaking and the tickling click of rats running the perimeter wetly in the dark could be heard, and Drano saw there in the dusty unfinished basement a continuation of the mass of dried foods and a workshop of negotiable finishing. It consisted of little more than a wooden slat cross paneled against the wall, with some five or six somewhat arbitrarily chosen tools hanging dustily thereupon. Drano sneezed and the roar of this spasm sent the dust in the hollow tubular flux of the flashlight into a sort of imploding vaccuum, and his convulsion boomed through the entire house. He stood with the flashlight at his hip, compacted into the floor, listening for footsteps, and he heard none. He imagined that the only people interested in participating in this deadly spectacle had already both arrived and died, considering no one else came out shooting. The Old Man seemed to be a hermit of sorts.

Drano swung the flashlight, satisfied with the silence. The light slid weirdly and warping through the damp stone basement and he did see stairs leading up to a cellar door, with reinforced locking the Old Man had installed during his life. This was how he was going in and out. Drano walked back up the stairs. There was a moment halfway when he felt a drifting miasma of cold at his

shoulders and thought he felt something sniffing almost at his back and he turned wildly and recklessly with his pistol, the safety off, and cursed at the absence found there in the trembling strobe of cool light, and the stairs creaked, and he passed back into the kitchen at the top of the stairs and across the tile. He passed along upstairs into the hermit's quavering and pumpkin lit quarters of insanity and these quarters were spartan indeed.

The Old Man had a bedroom with a green camoflauge sleeping bag slewn weirdly over the quilt like an enormous snake skin. He had a small potbelly oven beside his bed that he had scavenged somewhere to burn during winter. Drano walked through the Old Man's room. He wanted to shoot the man's bed. The man's clothing. The man's grandchildren. He stood breathing. His teeth were tingling. He wanted to go out to the lawn and resurrect and kill the Old Man again.

Drano passed out of the house back onto the lawn. It smelled of blood, of sulphurus smoke. He leant down while moving and swept up Waffle's pistol and strode across the blood spattered grass without looking to either Waffle or the Old Man's body, and he went along down the blue sparking neighborhood lane as if walking over water indifferently, everything roaring and silent as if below heavy waves underwater, this ghastly scene muffling everything within him and without him to a sort of compacted fluid silence and slow liquid precision.

He sloped up the yard of this other house, and he went and retrieved the pillowcase from the cool shadows at the foot of the stairs, and turned and went jangling through the afternoon sun, clutching the tinking pillowcase and the French pistol at the ready. The flashlight and Waffle's firearm clanked heavily therein, and the pillowcase twisted wildly as he fled as if he held a clothen bag of bundled snakes. Grass brushed whisping underfoot. His breath he could not hear, though it came and went from him labored and wheezing. Stone angel in a dry stone fountain. Green scum along the coping of the white bowl like something fallen and primogeniture. Bicycles in hedges overgrown. Ceramic gnomes disappearing behind Drano's hurtling form in the frenzied yellowing grass, their red pointed hats and eternally accepting smiles barely peeking up out of the long bleaching brush. Tears welled in Drano's huge bobbing face as he ran and his bottom lip quivered involuntarily and crazily in exaggerated trembling.

He pounced along and down the columned neighborhood lawns like some smartly clad and crazed necromancer fleeing these suburban regions of death in cosmic nervous breakdown. And he went loping through the grassy shadows between houses and slapping along the glittering grey driveways like something hounded invisibly from behind. He broke at length onto the lane where they had parked the car. He kept waiting for sirens. He stood panting. Right or left. The structures all about and within him seemed to vibrate and hum electrically. He looked down the lane. Mosquitoes drifted gangly through the midday swirl of flagging orange sunlight and wind. The sky vaulting above this now haunted neighborhood like a huge body of warm blue water. He felt himself drowning. He took a right and jogged heavily down the glistening blonde tesselation of sidewalk and his car came back into view as he rounded the first curve. It looked like some kind of metal chrysalis there, refracting wildly in the sunlight.

Drano reached the door harried and panting, glancing over his shoulder and occasionally swinging backwards and brandishing the sleek black plastic upward and scanning his surroundings, and turning again. Everything wheeled about him and it felt as if he ran down a spiral revolving. His head reeled with vertigo and the image of Waffle's sprent head and he went pale there in the daylight. He rested a hand on the warm chrome hood of the car and vomited

generously on the street beside the front left wheel, and he stood there bent above his expulsion, panting and spitting and crying. Bird calls as if through an extended funnel met his ear and he raised his head quickly and blood rushed therefrom and black spots throbbed across his field of sight, and the very firmament beneath him felt to be see-sawing and spinning, but it would not catapult his friend through the missile blue sky over these angles of shingle and chimney back to him into the passenger seat.

He unlocked the car and tossed these cursed and twisting effects onto the floor of the passenger seat, and he slunk down into the cocoon warmth of the driver's seat and shut the door as if sealing himself in a vacuum. Drano stared ahead with tears silently sliding down his eyes and blinking and in the silence he suddenly issued such a flurry of punches into the body of the steering wheel that his hands came away bloodied at the knuckle, and he collapsed against the wheel crying into his arms and saying Waffle's name and apologizing to him by name, for not having shot the man on sight, for having been so consumed with greed as to suggest working on two houses at once. He envied Waffle's death and destroyed the flesh of his knuckles further against the wheel.

He sat for a moment staring bleakly out through the windscreen at the curving neighborhood lane and the blue sky curling up beyond. He started the car and drove in silence from the neighborhood. A blood moon hung visible already in the steel afternoon light, full and bloated with evil, like some eager huge yellow grey goblin laying in wait on the skyline.

It felt as if there was a succession of collapses occuring within his person as if to mirror, as if all at once, the deteriorating surroundings. There was no center to his person or his destiny, and he felt sourceless and hurling headlong through the weightless expanse of the galaxy within him, untethered from anything of substance, deracinated from anything resembling some steadily bolted cleat upon which to cast a single line of his life save that of cyclic suffering. And the substance or meaning of that suffering lay in deep question as he passed driving along the frozen stone undulation of roadways that ran through the sloping silent forest, the vined spectra at his side soft green, flickering silently and prehensile in the most eventual manner. Wind rippled in and he drank urgently from the crimson blossom of his styrofoam cup, and tears were in his eyes like a little boy, and he said aloud to Waffle that he should not have allowed the old bitch to have even continued walking toward him with the shotgun. And he apologized again crying to his friend as he drove. Waffle wouldn't have lived, though. He knew. He did not say this aloud. He drove wildly, the tires seering up and across the sky in a scream of rubber and stone, and he flew along through the sunset envying his dead friend there headless on the lawn. That he was free of this constant precarious scrabble. Free of the authorities. Free of needs and fears. That he was free of something with which one must perceive and consider these things. He saw again in the center of his mind, as if displayed in full epistemological portrait, the unintelligible pink batter of his friend's head, as it was rendered before him, a sort of flattened and indiscriminate chunky mist there in the grass. The resoldered and sundered and still hissing gold chain. It was as if in removing Waffle's head the Old Man had somehow blotted out Waffle's unique existence altogether as a concept and, like the gradual spread of some sick diseased grey matter in the corpus, this effect seemed to be tunneling backwards to Drano, blotting him and his countenance away retroactively. Leaving only gnashing. He passed along the wooded slants and the narrow

road, and the estate was ahead on the right and he pulled upon the property line wondering if he was better off shooting himself and he knew he could not.

Drano parked and stumbled out of the car and trotted woodenly across the anvil laden lawn with his bag and, at the door, he vanished back into the half light of the mansion, back to his potions and to his suffering like some melancholy retired alchemist. The sun passed in the colors of a bobcat through the windows and he stood there numbly regarding this vast stone sarcophagus. The mansion itself was as silent as its shadows, and the marble slate was cool underfoot as if he slanted across an embalmed wedge of black swirled mountain glacier. There were paintings enshadowed on the walls of ballerinas, knotting their flesh colored slippers and stretching before an elongated mirror and so forth. Impressionist pieces. Drano could see the ridgework of the raw pigment cast on the taut canvases. Originals. No market that this man could enter. Waffle's dispersed countenance.

He set down the pillowcase and it clanked hard and the sound carried through the house wearily, as if every sound made only fed some throbbing larval thing that lived off the tension of a man's solitary movements and words through another's house. He tiptoed unconciously through shadow into slanted planks of sandy light. Musky sweet smell of cannabis still dank in the undisturbed air. Grief overcame him and he went slouching through a tiger pattern of orange light and jagged shadow into the pink sunlight of the kitchen. He passed along to the huge chrome slate cooler as if propelled by static electricity and he took from the refrigerator two bottles of brown standard cola.

He and Waffle had some days earlier spent part of their workday collecting foodstuffs and beverages for the estate, taken almost entirely from gas stations on the outskirts of town. Drano was always emphasizing that they work outward in. A yellow bellied songbird clung to the house by the window ledge, and it clicked about there and regarded Drano curiously through the warped glass. It launched a moment later from the sill and went tunneling back out through the spring warmth, disappearing into the small bright green jungle of the backyard. Over the stone statues of rabbits and gnomes. Grey green eyes like stone buttons. The eyes of the blind. The murky pitch colored koi pond. Sunlight flickering upon those umber waters the color of sawdust.

Drano took the two room temperature plastic bottles of soda, and he set about the composition of his tonics, holding the brown bottle up to the the slant and dying light like some cheerless toast to the setting sun. The stringy purple ink streamed trickling into both of the bottles with a sort of extended and lapsing violet liquid fracture and blossom. He dropped three robin's egg blue circular tablets into both of these, as if for good luck, and they went tumbling insanely through the fizzing fluid to the quartered plastic bottom of the bottles.

Drano had only three pints and some thirty percocet remaining. They had not yet entered a pharmacy since reaching Virginia. There was no they now. Drano looked at the glass of the window, not the image behind it, and he thought of the diamonds and he did not care about them anymore. The man hoisting the gleaming wooden butt of the shotgun up into his armpit. The blood misted lawn and the crackling wet matter in the grass he had trod through. He sloped through the greying home across the alabastrine cool stone and fetched the pillowcase from the entrance and he went along back into the kitchen, pulling the velvet sack from the pillowcase and setting ir on the counter. The house was silent. Only the settling expression of carbonation could be heard. He tugged at the tassels and the neck of the black bag loosed, and the glowing stones

pulsed bluely and iridescent therein, as if he clutched before him there not a bag of stone but a bag of discrete droplets of water. But no gentle flame did these generate in the icy chambers of his broken and thrumming heart upon studying.

Waffle, I'm sorry, my nigga. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, my nigga. Alone and aloud in the opalescent and glowing mansion. The dark kitchen. His voice carrying weirdly over the latticed white and black tiles as if it resonated only to signify his solitude and his madness. He capped one of the bottles of cola and drank heavily from the other and he shuffled like some huge sad bear out of the kitchen with these and for the next three days, he did little more than abuse to unusual excess his potions, and lie in bed smoking cigarettes. Halfway through the second night he sat up insane and sweating, scrambling for his gun at the bedside, and taking it up and shooting insanely at something you cannot see, and his eyes bloodshot red like the quietus of blue itself as a pigment, and glowing like cinnabar coals, and the shots ripped cleanly through the wall and carried tunneling through three more walls, before shattering the windows in the southern master bedroom, passing into the forest beyond. He sat there in bed pulling the trigger meaninglessly in the raw dark, as if besorceled to the firing and able only to carry out the mechanical action without question or assessment. A moment later his eyes rolled whitely back toward his brain in the blackened room and his lids fluttered heavily, and a moment later he was asleep, spent gun in hand and chin fallen to chest and drooling. Slumped against the headboard. A man without source and without destination. The milky way at the window. The stone figures of the garden below, bathing in moonlight. Grey green muck. The rust of rocks. It begins to rain.

XXIX

When Ruggles finally pulled himself from the pooling ruins of the bed, the yellow and white honeycomb patterned comforter and damp mustard colored sheets, the sun was already setting. He sat up blinking in the blushing marmalade light. He had to bury the boy properly. He fell back into the bed and closed his eyes and dust poofed up out the pillow, and Ruggles watched it go etching away from his head, through the flagging sunlight, and he pulled himself from the bed and made his way wearily across to his little friend's room, and he looked in on Wayne had arranged it. He gazed troubled and heartbroken upon Wayne's stolen and largely speculative collection of designer clothing. All of it sized so small, with the exception of his uncle's sweatsuit. Wayne had all of these garments folded neatly and sacredly there in the corner of Dolphin's room by the window. Ruggle's eyes welling with tears and hardly awake more than a few minutes. Poisonous grief unraveling in his abdomen like octopus ink. Wayne's little Glock replica that shot .6mm steel balls at a rate of five hundred and fifty feet a second, primed with a twelve-gram zeppelin shaped aluminum cartridge of carbon dioxide. Ruggles picked this up from the floor through watery eyes and he did watch blearily as his own tears fell in some kind of anointment of the bleached wooden flooring of this room. Wayne had gathered everything pink into a single corner and thrown a sheet over it. This child still gone today upon waking. All these children spirited away living and dead.

Ruggles made his way downstairs to the kitchen and he washed his tablets down with a sloshing bottle of orange juice they had managed from the grocery store on their final trip there, and he knew if he did not set out at once to bury the boy, that he would not at all, and so he bore his eyes out the window and blinked and spun on his heels and packed a few gas station snacks and

beverages into the brown canvas of his knapsack, and he drifted through out the back door into the whirling grapefruit expressions of sunset.

He slouched along haunted, scanning the horizon constantly, glancing over his shoulder, everything dangerous and serious now in the absence of this single soul that the world had very little use for and who, indeed, had very little likewise to offer the world to which he was stricken. The vines and trees as he saw them. Indifferent. Alien viridescence. Relentless. Creeping greenly and blossoming secretly and in silence without confiding in man. Puke green. A frenzied break of poison ivy in the brush at Ruggle's left so slick with oil that it did carry the sunlight wetly upon the whorled greenstained psychedelia of its leaves. Stinging nettle glittering in the sun like emerald ice crystals, forking up in pale green and angular snowflake formations and clustering in the varied kudzu scribbling about edge of the forest. Behold these nettles there, as he does, waxing mightily up out of the soil in soft green, and forking out in digital nodes that bob easily and serrated in the breeze. Those leaves raise the flesh as instantly and nigh as searing as a glowing brand. Boil off the sting in water, it's true, and you can eat it. Blanch it, rather. He spat and passed along through the final copper pink expressions of the setting sun, and through the grey twilight he drifted through a multidimensional agony and loneliness. Turn around. Ravens crashing through the evening air and swooping up, their silhouettes against the emerging moon itself. Ruggles passed along. Everything was Wayne. The querulous black eyes of birds. The wild rabbit with his flopping and mottled ears. Darting and checking. Sniffing up at the air and bounding. This boy of hardly nineteen years old had lessened for Ruggles the load of a presumable apocalypse down to a laughable inconvenience, a cooly accepted adventure.

Ruggles crested a hill and he passed back into the neighborhood where Wayne died. There were maple trees at the entrance and Ruggles saw birds nesting and clutching and fluting out calls from the gnarled wooden perches of these trees. Loons honked hoarsely and invisibly beyond. Wayne must already be decomposing. This child decomposing like an entirely finished product. Finished without permission. Ended. Ruggles sobbed as he walked the neighborhood lane, and he cried out to God in the dark blue crepuscular matrix to end his life, as well, or instead, and he went staggering down the tinkling quartz light of the blue pavement with tears sliding down his cheeks. Star fragments there in the cobalt stone. Made of stardust, we are, they say. And so the great will of dark space necessarily embedded therein us, as well.

Ruggles peered down the hill through his tears and saw the door still open to the house that he had slept in and in which he had temporarily interred Wayne. He swung his vision across the street. The house with the sloping gable and the still open window. The bulb light on and casting palely out upon the darkling slant roof. Warmth and light to tempt one. The crumpled green rosebushes. The airconditioning unit. The pachyderm pink petals scattered and crushed about the foot of the bush. These bushes all thorns. This world a bush of thorns alone through which we fumble blindly and nakedly for something with which we might present endearingly to our beloved and finish accepted forever. All the petals fallen long ago. Generations decomposing downward.

He passed across the front yard of this sepulchre at a grassy angle swishing along, and he went lumbering up the wooden steps of the porch as if he was to be hung from that very platform and stood at the open door. Two bright red cats ran sleekly across the road, like motile flames, at Ruggles back and he swung around wildly, having felt perhaps some slight shift of air upon his

neck, or some presence, for their feet were silent over the tamped and pummeled blue stone. A sick sour smell hung at the entrance of the house. That and shadows. Ruggles drew his breath deep into his abdomen and he crossed the threshhold and turned into the living room and Wayne's body was not there. The blankets were piled as if scattered aside there on the living room floor, and there was a deep shadow in the carpet of Wayne's crumpled shape, and the sick perfume of death hung thickly in the shadowed room, but the boy's little body was gone. Had he risen. Small body healed and standing up and stepping out into the golden street and levitating to heaven. Ruggles ran out of breath and he breathed in and nearly wretched, inhaling the first time in the house, and immediately he went bounding out of this rank room in search of Wayne. Whether he searched for the boy in his form of death or some mended, or even perhaps zombied, form, he was not sure.

He checked every room, every floor. As if he might have picked the broken boy up one more time before leaving and mislaid him elsewhere in the house absentmindedly. Foolish. Had he risen. He said that Christ was still on the cross. That all the history of man occurs over the course of those three days in some other ancient and excruciating elsewhere. Ruggles passed back through the anteroom and he pulled his shirt up over his nose and padded across the carpet and kicked at the blankets and looked about for something he himself could not articulate, and he passed out of the house and stood on the front porch panting and gagging dryly. It was night now. The forest rasped in the wind and bulbous frogs did belch bulbously from their slick red clay slopes. The night wind smelled of coniferous trees and lilac, and the dark fell upon Ruggles there on the porch like some great black broom sweeping the face of the earth. See Ruggles, in silhouette. Dark form through these cryptic regions of death risen and rotting corpses. Cicadas in their silent knowledge signaling wooden and tremulously in the dark of the forest as he moves. He passed across the street like a vampire, cowling his collar up against the wind and drifting rightward over the lawn, and breaking down and sobbing aloud at their suffering again, at this nightmarish and relentless bucolia, waxy in the moonlight and charged with indifferent mastery. Posed disgustingly. Ruggles stood in the front lawn, looking up at the lightbulb and the open window there, and he wished the house cleared from the earth. Burning down there before him.

Wayne, he yelled from the grass. Wayne.

His voice drifted through the particle of night sounds and it was lost in the black. Wherefrom Ruggles stood, the moon was partially blocked by the chimney, but still it shone pale grey over the house, huge and accusatory, bloated and mottled about with blue and grey scarring. Ruggles yelled Wayne's name across the horizon again like a wolf at the crest of a canyon and the name went ringing out weirdly across the dark blue landscape and echoed in a pitiful aspect across the deteriorated night sky. Cold stardust. Cold willed. Will of this galaxy. Universe. Had he risen. No one came to the window. And no call came back to him through that wind.

Ruggles passed around to the back of the house, and he saw for the first time then, enubilated by the moonlight, a white ceramic birdfeeder in a far corner of the yard with a corpulent little cherub cross legged and set lazily on the coping. Cheerful rest for the innocent little creature. He passed back around to the front. The two crimson cats were in the passage on the side of the house and they snarled weirdly at him as he came tumbling around the corner like sounds scribbled on a chalkboard, and they went darting like agitate fire sprites into the dark of the thicket. Wayne was gone. Ruggles swung the knapsack to his front and he lit a cigarette, and he

walked back across the street to the house where Wayne had been kept. He passed through the waves of grass there and stepped over a tricycle and a line of clay pots half filled with pitch, sprouting mint green clovers now untended in the dark, and he floated along searching for some ghost or corpse and he curved around the house and passed along and there in the backyard found nothing.

A stone fox statue by the liquid looking sliding glass doors. A small plastic playhouse in the overgrown grass with a lattice of spinning blocks. Ruggles trotted through this and he saw the protracted legs of a mosquito swing sickly and thinly through the moonlight toward him. He swatted wildly at it and moved on harried and tingling, passing back around the other side of the house. Letting his hand slide along the vinyl siding. It was as if the absence of the body had offered a sort of temporary moratorium in his person that allowed that Wayne might be, in some capacity, alive, and he clung to this as he passed now back through the neighborhood. He slouched up the acanthoid curvature of the hill, at the bottom of which were these twin houses of death, eyes rolling crazily in the moonlight. Searching for Wayne, whether in his living or dead form he was not certain, and he crested the hill and spat and turned and scanned everything along the panoramic horizon. Dark birds through the tattered night. Loons still stridulent and invisible. Nothing. Where.

He would walk the road back properly. Has this child risen, my God. Small negroid imp of tireless cheer. Still rotting. That was the fragrance of vultures in there. Like one might find in the heart of their enormous and slick black-twigged nests. Ruggles shuddered in this maelstrom of quietus and absent corpus, and he passed along knitting his hands deep in the pocket of his jacket, and as he walked the stars dotted the sky mistily in ghostly white colors, and the moon lit the road with such a spill of creamy light that Ruggles tread squinting through a sort of alabastrine ignis fatuus.

He passed from the neighborhood lane and onto the darkened roadway, trodding along through the grass at the side of the street, scanning everywhere and rustling, and calling out his friend's lonely name in a manner that both emerged from and confused the deeply embedded calculations of his unconscious mind, and the name sounded strange passing out of him into the insectoidal chattery of the unpersoned night. Ruggles walked along sweeping his eyes about and he tottered down the roadside like the first man set on the planet, now in direct pursuit of death itself. And gracklings cried out from the vaulting trees under whose wild and knuckling boughs he is now passing. Wayne. Has he risen, rotted. He passed along through the shadows and broke at length into full moonlight and he walked astride a field of little more than grass that broke at the edges into blackened woods, and he passed over a bridge in the roadway over a thin stream, and passing over it, at the last moment, he peered to the side and downward from the railway and glimmed the slightest weep of orange flicker from a flame or light down there in the dark below the structure. Ruggles paused and looked about his position suspiciously. He grieved even in this very moment of vigilance how the character of everything had changed with Wayne's death, and he tip-toed over and leaned over the rail of the bridge and tried to peer down and around. And trying suchlike, he did see with certainty the flickering of a flame beneath the bridge, a single candle. The candle didn't light itself, of course.

The drop down was about ten feet, into a sandy slope that ran slanted down along some ten feet to where a cold and polluted creek ran thinly, and across this crick the earth sloped back up in

great bearded and stalactite structures of light brown clay and mud and roots. The crick ran beneath the bridge.

Hello? Ruggles asked angled over the bridge.

Silence.

The steady whap of the orange-tinged yellow petals of light still there visible on the damp and thickly granular sand. Cicadas droning. The wind blew a mighty gust, and the smell of creekwater came washing up to Ruggles, and he ran across the dark road and checked the other side. There was no flame flickering there. Ruggles ran back across the street like something digital and tenuous, arms wild and spinning. He bent back over the gritty stone ledge variegated with colorful knots and bubbles of spraypaint.

Hello?

The croaking of frogs and the winding sounds of tree trunks swaying in the forest. Ruggles spat down into the thin creek and he saw the spider egg looking spittle pass carried away into darkness on the thin current and emerge back into moonlight at a curve and carried again into darkness away under the bridge and he clambered up and straddled the ledge and brought his other foot around, and hung at length therefrom and looked down and saw the drop, and he dropped into sand the texture of damp brown sugar and his shoes sunk to the ankles of his trousers down through this aerated mist of rocks.

He was staggering up out of the frenzied creekbed sand when he saw it beneath the bridge. The flame licked greedily up out of a blank white votive candle. It was placed at the feet of Wayne's profaned remains. Ruggles lurched toward the image and then spun around wildly, a distraction, his eyes flashing huge white, as if the designer of this grotesque exhibit might be lurking in the cold shadows lying in wait of him, in wait of the performance of some act inarticulate and dark and unknowable. He scanned down the bridge side's shuttling shadow, and all of this dark did he eye with a glance as serious as the scenery, and he called out that if someone was in the shadows there that he would kill them dead and nothing came back to him but the resonance of his threat beneath the bridge, and he approached the whipping candlelight and saw his friend there alit grotesquely. His body had been hoisted or pierced through about the anus with a blood smeared sharpened branch that emerged again at the top of his back below his neck. The wooden post was set into the sand upright beneath the bridge, and Wayne's ruined corpus hung green purple there in the flickering candlelight like some kind of grotesque scarecrow for the keeping away of trolls.

He was naked and rotting, slumped there on the wooden spear, phosphorescent witch green, his eyes and genitals cut away. Ruggles approached through the sand into the cold shadow beneath the bridge. He covered his nose with his sleeve and glanced wildly around through the dark pronouncing his threat again and he slanted up and peered at the boy's face. He saw the eyes had been removed with moths furry and grey-black in the defouled orbital sockets, positioned outfacing. Monkey bat faces. Two eyes in each eye. His frog's mouth unaccountably stuffed with long brunette caucasoid hair. Flies all about him, crawling into and out of his body in formic piles. Buzzing as audibly as the thin purl of the creek itself. Matching the water with darkness. Ruggles shuddered and wretched dryly into the slanted sand and he swung around in the darkness, scanning all directions, as if suddenly in a shootout. He was certain he was being observed. Dark in every direction, save this grotesque candlelit installation beneath the bridge.

There was the minimal tinkling of the creek there. The trickling water looked black passing along, and crickets dragged longly their limbs about him in eternal teethed song. The crackling of the living night forest. Ruggles repeated his threat and stumbled back too close to the boy and he came into orbit of the swarming flies and sucking larval creatures that feasted posessively on his reeking and defiled corpse. Ruggles looked at his little friend there. That Wayne, who would very literally, and did in fact, go to jail before living without stolen designer clothing, would be so interred.

A rasping through the dark beyond under the bridge on the far side. Ruggle's body went into a sort of sickening mist of horror, as if a pestilence designed for himself alone was sent plunging and liquid into the raw blue cord of his vein. He bore into the dark. Black swollen body swaying on its gross wooden hoist. Crackling in the woods on the other side of the bridge, pure dark there. Ruggles scrambled leftward down the sloping sand and fetched blindly through the shallow waters for a rock of reasonable size. He felt in the cold water gelled sheets of scum flitting there in green accumulation and his hand did pass sharply and cut across a broken bottle, and he said nothing at this and all the while his eyes were fixed on the impenetrable dark beyond the boy. The other side of the bridge. Several maggots fell out of one of a series of new puncture wounds in the boys torso, and Ruggles swung his eyes up wildly that way with particulate terror. Hand still submerged in the skeining water and scrambling about like a desperate starfish for a rock upon which to warm. And his hand drifted through the cold fluid against the current and passing along the bottom he felt a heavy ridged and cubic piece of amphibiolite and this he pulled sucking from the sand and water and wielded it up dripping in his hand with the scummy water. He went crabwise, clutching this at extension in his off hand and scuttling sideward up the shore. Staring down the dark on the other side of the bridge. He would not pass that way. He would not pass across the point of the boy's body.

Thrash of shadows in the dark, just beyond the boy, it seemed. Cold ran through Ruggle's neck and he switched the rock to his right hand and steadied it there, planted at the border of the candlelight. He stood there in the shadows slanted and panting, staring into the tunneling black beneath the bridge. The boy creaked swaying on the branch at the periphery. His corpse was rank. There was a farrago of buzzing about his barf green corpus and the candlelight flickered on him weirdly, as if waking him to his ruined image with every thrash of orange light upon his person and face. He looked at the hoist stick in the copper colored light. The top was sharpened in clean strokes it seemed with a knife, or a handsaw, and it did bear on the exposed pulp of the point the vermillion and viscera-streaked stain of the boy's insides. His moth's eyes flashed in the candlelight. Ruggles did not know what this meant in relation to the evacuation, in relation to anything. A splash like a single icicle descending to glass off in the dark. Under the bridge. Ruggles yelled out that he would kill any person he came upon down there, and there was a sudden coolness at the back of his neck and he spun wildly in the sand and his shoes caught in the sucking alluvium, and he staggered over and fell sideward dumbly into the cool sand for a moment and felt pure panic. He scrambled up and regained himself on the slope and called out again the same, that he would murder any person he encountered, and he was still clutching the rock, and his heart beat in his chest as if it wished to escape and find some other host whose life was less chaotic, and he could not stop looking at his gnomic little black friend there, broken and profaned. He stood in the sand at a slant, and there was another splash at the far end, and he

thought he heard a whisper, and electricity positively filled his entire person and he nearly sent the rock hurtling into the dark out of fear alone. As if some gigantic and monstrous creature was awaiting to pounce at him out of the black of the other side, and he glanced again panicked to his candlelit little friend there, his missing parts, and backed away and started sideward up the sloping sand, eyes fixed all the while on the dark beyond the boy, stone held at preflexure, stumbling up from the creek into the forest.

He stood clutching the wet rock in silence at a distance for sometime once crested. Breathing and watching the uniformly impenetrable penumbra beyond the boy. Glancing intermittently from the slanted forest above the bridge and across the roadway to the other side. Ruggles thought he saw a small shadow working slowly and unnaturally along the counter-ledge shielding off the drop on the far side of the road. Ruggles watched the little form as it withdrew into the greater rag of shadow at the edges. A possum or raccoon. Footsteps at his back through the forest, swift across the leaves crackling. Ruggles spun. He did not see anyone and he pronounced another death call and his hand was shaking wildly with the rock and he scanned the periphery, the dark. Was there kicked up leaf in fall in the moonlight when I swung? Was that me? He stood breathing in the dark. Listening. Weak purl and tink of the creek below. Wind at his back. Tingling along his shoulder and arms.

Ruggles swung around and fixed his eyes again on the darkness below the bridge, and he glanced over his shoulder and he could not decide which view to make primary. Small swaying body in the marmalade fandango of candlelight. Full of strange holes. Maggots curling. I allowed he might have been alive. I did. I am a child. A monster. A rasping of leaves. He swung around. Shadow passing backwards through the trees, upright and person shaped. Drifting backwards through the shadowy trunks out of the moonlight and into darkness. A fear came over Ruggles seeing this that was so profound that he cried out and ran blindly and indifferent in the opposite direction, headlong through twigs and branches and pine needles and thorn and thicket, and broke at length into a patch of stinging nettle at the roadside and went staggering onto the pavement as if this was still some kind of public realm in which one could take the security of being seen. Eyes wide with fear and sliding all about in search of ghouls and murderous perverts. Literal demons. Groups of them. Small shadow again at the other side of the bridge. At the corner. Ruggles looked to sky and watched a vulture riding the thermals in the slate blue above for a moment and he looked on and moved metallically, cleaving to the center of the road along his path.

Ruggles remembered he had Wayne's Glock replica in his bookbag, and he fumbled through it wildly and fetched this out and it brandished heavy in his palm and looked real and looked deadly in the moonlight, and Ruggles clutched this and held it at his side as he scampered harried and wearily down the center of the roadway. Staying in the middle of the paving and following the painted path there, as if alit to holographic life by the bright twinned yellow-lines there, frantically checking his right and left, driting along the road's curvature paranoically and haunted. Shadows flitting along through the dark there, too, between the silhouettes of tree trunks and knuckling boughs. The forest at his sides. Could not be possible. He called out again his promise of death for any encounter whatsoever and this time he brandished the pistol in three hundred and sixty degrees of moonlight and falsely guaranteed its lethality, and passed on harried by darknesses, more than one. His young friend gone. So green. Moth faces hirsute and

black. Buttoneyed like gibbons. He knew not what these things meant in this moment or in relation to the larger collapse of society, for he had Wayne before this to quite satisfiedly explicate upon and shrug off the end of the world, and they even coming to relish it for its lack of direction and police.

The tatterclad black robe of night. He pulled his collar again up about his impallored countenance, Dracula glancing paranoid over his shoulder, and he fled through the torn onxy gauze of dark. It was like a hand set suddenly cold and bony upon his bobbing shoulder in recondite and unannounced claim. Ruggles bobbed further down along the road's center, staggering slap footed along the sloping pavement, his eyes and head in a constant and murderous swivel. He came to the quaking stone formation at the front of his neighborhood. It was wet with moonlight. Glowing white in uncanny liquid silhouette. The furred trees there beyond enveloping owls and chipmunks, like lizards and beetles hidden away in the warm mane of a lion. Quick footsteps across the street at his back. Ruggles spun and leveled the gun directly down the center lane and to the right. Tracing the acoustic pathway. Shadows alone. He eyed the scenery down the black glittering barrel of the Glock, dragging right and left from the center of the road. Poison ivy at the foot of the forest there waxen even in the scant grey light. He called out his promise again. Wayne didn't put himself on that pole. This must be what everyone fled. He backed away up the road with the gun out before him for some steps, and he scanned the panorama a final time through the gunsights and he spun and kept on, turning into the neighborhood.

Ruggles passed through this charybdis of leaf and dark and moonlight and shadow, listening his breath and his footsteps, tingling everywhere and clutching the Glock like a crucifix. His brow soaked. Moon bulbous above this wandering speck of black. Wanting to sob again. Needing someone. There was no one. The burglars. He could try. Smacking along the sidewalk and through the lawns, and then suddenly frantic again and breaking into a full sprint, feeling wind nudge his poncho gently at the back, and he hurtled headlong back toward the moon glittering pavement like a man on fire, and he ran out to the obsolete public forum of the center lanes again and passed through the moonlight and his vacant neighborhood like a werewolf, or some similarly lunar driven creature, and he arrived unassailed and passed up the slope of his driveway, walking backwards, eyes wild on the panorama for absolutely anything that might be studying him, and slipping behind the fence gate soundlessly, washing as if in reverse across the pitiful backyard into the generous and cold penumbra of his real property. He fumbled in the dark with the key. He could see the glass itself through the moon and he could see the enshadowed room through the glass. The projector was off and cold moonlight slid about unreliably within. This is a just huge ruined room, now, without Wayne. A lonely shitty room. A room and a dying man. As it was so it is again.

Ruggles passed on through the glass door into the dark, still gripping the Glock and glancing over his shoulder for wraiths and tingling at whatever lay out there in the dark at his back. He took up in the dark of the kitchen, watching the neighborhood lane for some time, smoking cigarettes and studying shadows on the street. The sleek black replica still in the soft of his free palm. Metallic and weighty. Through bleary and suddenly crying eyes he gazed out the window. Completely alone. Perhaps hunted. Perhaps. And he sobbed as quietly and as subdued as possible, and he stood watching the row of driveways and abandoned houses, as if it was a dark

lake that passengers and skiffs regularly drifted down. He thought to himself that Wayne would understand at once what had happened to his little body, who was most likely responsible, and probably make some hysterical cryptic wisecrack on how seemingly obvious the design and purposes of this removal and defilement were. Green pulsing husk on a stick. Full of worms and a farrago of sickly buzzing vicious black flies all about and within his sloughing rank skin, climbing past the hair stuffed into his mouth for access. Tears welled in Ruggle's eyes and the moonlight hung whitely and pale above his grieving form. He could see the whole of the moon in the top right of the window, above the treeline, backdropped in the darkest blue. He pushed his hands down into his jacket pockets and balled them there, some unknowable cold upon him, and he turned from the window and strode across the room and tried the Walkie Talkie.

XXX

The man passed into Virginia and it was some ten days before he came upon the person and path of Drano. The small changed boy still in his possession, growling and hooting from his cage in the back of van, in postures bizarre and modeled, contorting about the cage floor beside and upon the agitated serpent much in the manner of the man himself, in leisure or in worship. He watched this through the rearview mirror with pride. And though the man was still consumed everyday, and throughout the day, with a giddy urge to end the boy's life, if alone for introducing variation in the man's carnal knowledge of the boy. Notwithstanding, the man felt pride watching the boy blindly take after him. Spastic and moaning and onanistic. Like a small demented chimpanzee with the brain of a snake. It is this upon which the man reflected the first time he saw Drano and Waffle's profiles whoosh by through the Virginia dark. The man had been sat with his headlights off and idling, preparing in the back of the van to worship there with the boy. He slid into the front seat to shut the engine off and in that moment the man watched the nigger's huge head and a second smaller nigger head drag by in kenspeckled silhouette, and the man's jaw went slack at this, naked in the front seat. He wanted to turn the car on in that moment and begin after the man, disrobed and all, but his master bade him to cleave to the sequence they had discussed. That this was their covenant. And that his knowledge of the whereabouts of the nigger was not so limited as to demand a moment of frantic capitalization such as this would be. Nay, instead his master understood the material universe in such a comprehensive capacity as to tell you the location of any single living thing upon it at any moment.

The man started the car in the pale moonlight, and he drove naked with the headlights off in the direction he had seen the niggers go. He passed for some three hundred yards of pure black along these curving and forested backroads, creeping along and trailing Drano's red and orange rearlights through the irrational dark ahead, needing only tend to the drag of these lights and wind through the blackened roads, serried rows of birch and sweetgum on either side of the car. The man wound along through the dark, watching the twinned lights transfer about the wooded roadway, the glow of red at the driver's checks and pads. The man hung back watching, mumbling to himself, as the lights of the car conveying the nigger's huge head and body, as well as the body and head of another nigger, went sliding off the main roadway and pulled along the expansive and looping driveway of an enormous estate, and the man shook his head in awe at

this nigger. At how he lived and conducted himself. A mansion. Out of every house. The chrome sedan glistered in the moonlight, and the man watched with a slackened jaw, from the dark of his vehicle some one hundred yards back on the main road, as it purred gloriously along the estate's winding and preened arboreal driveway. The nigger's car was the color of pure mercury and glode as silently along the driveway, and the man watched as the nigger parked in an arbitrary manner that caused the man a great deal of discomfort, and, from his endarkened perch, the man saw that the rolling lawn hosted an arrangement of partially submerged and gnarled steel cubes. The man could not make out from his position what these were. If they were some kind of sculpture, or nigger vandalism. He assumed the latter.

Clouds passed before the moon and his position was darkled to pure black. The boy righted himself upward and came to the bars of cage. A brown and grey mottled owl swept down across the road from some invisible lofted penumbra and it splashed down so with wings fanned and claws reeling that it looked as if the bird were lowering drastically into water. The man's master told him to drive away that very moment. The man noted the address to himself, and he passed along the road slowly, keeping the van's headlights off for some two hundred yards. He turned the headlights on, and, without announcement, rain came sloping down against the windscreen in huge globular bursts that drummed insanely across the window. The man hissed at this when it began, and he drove and convulsively hissed for some time, entertaining a sexually-charged notion in his mind wherein he was able to transfer the materials of his consciousness into a serpent's body. He pictured himself attacking a small child in a cradle from a snake's presumed swooping-in perspective. A moment later, the scenery of the man's grotesque inscape shifted and before him hung suspended an image of a greenscaled man, with the head of a serpent, and a glorious spaded tail, and compact wings of pale green, and the man's heart sunk numbly away within him in revelry. There was little doubt that this was the form his master had planned when he finalized their sequence and transformed. He thought of the tail already accumulating at the small of back. Small pale pink maggot of tugged leathery flesh. And he was then transfixed by the image of this perfect creature again. He passed on through the dark. The boy himself had in general already begun pulling at the flesh above his intergluteal cleft. Growling at the rain and taking up hissing as the man had. The man watched with something like pride as this small brown creature drooled and growled, absently tugging at the flesh of his lower back in the selfsame manner of the man.

They passed along in the van. The man. The boy. The snake. He drove easily through this ruined and rural Virginia county, naked and urinating freely onto himself as he curved along through the wandering moonlight and splashing rain. To express his bladder as such while driving had been his custom, as well as the boy's, since they departed from California, and the van transported within it a miasma composed of not only the rank feline odor of this urine, but the humming vehicle passed along the highways and roads carrying, as well, a thick fragrance of reptile musk and feces and blood.

Moonlight flickered wildly into the moving car with the rain, splashing milk light down through the windshield, and it ghosted through the front seats into the back of the van and painted the boy in a quicksilver aspect that flagged and waxed and beheld him there in hideous whitened attitudes. Small black eyes rabid in the pale light in a discordant and homicidal aspect. It was true. The man found the boy had a taste for the delivery of quietus. They had found hitchhikers

on their way, for instance. Others left behind. And were they vulnerable or unchaperoned enough to generate little struggle, the man had slain them with the boy's help in both full daylight and in the penumbra of evening, and they both did have carnal knowledge of these poor murdered travelers in the places where they made them yield up their souls. The man drove along through the dark and the rain watching the rearview mirror as the misting pale light flashed across the boy's bloodsmeared countenance. The snake in the cage there with him, winding about heavily and sliding across the boy's small feet as if in ownership of him like some disgusting animate conglomerate of all the darkness held therein.

The boy had taken a great shine to this serpent as of late, and he spent much of their time in commute nuzzling with the slick and aggravated serpent, writhing upon the floor of the cage beside it in similar postures of deflexure and coil. The man glanced in the rearview mirror and the boy's eyes flicked at once to meet his and he watched cheerfully as the boy squatted and shat into his hands like some small and now extinct primogeniture creature giving birth upright in a mud hut. The man smiled and the boy smeared the waste across his face and then across the length of the snake. The snake thrashed wildly. The man glanced through the mirror and registered this act and the serpent's reaction, and he stopped the van so abruptly that the cage and the bizarre creatures therein did go hurtling, nigh airborne, toward the windshield, terminating at the front seats, where the clattering frame of the cage could not pass, the boy wrought up aloft as if by a tornado, smashing into the angular upper right corner of his metal quarters, and the serpent swam wildly at his back through the air, agitated and dislocate and weightless, hissing with eyes wild and yellow, hurling through the air in hideous sibilation like a tubular black balloon loosed about the rubber coping.

The man was out of the car into the driving rain in an instant. The whiff and muted shifting of the driver's door slamming. Whoosh of night sounds and clattering rain for a moment. The boy put his hand in his mouth. The back door of the van swung open, and it swung so hard that it hit the counterside of the van's body and clanked back creaking to some average position. The boy hissed insanely and immediately at the pale blue night sky and flecking rain that washed in behind the man's trembling silhouette.

The man hunched up into the back, leaving the door open. He was naked and trembling with rage and his body glittered pinkly with rainwater and urine. The van was braked on a slight uptick in the road, and their amber mixture of piss tunnelled sloshing down the grooves of the van's floor, and dripped therefrom in effulgent yellow beads down upon the chrome back bumper of the van and there beyond to the glittering pavement below, whereupon rain danced wildly. The man stood over the cage shaking. He smelled of rainwater.

You will clean the serpent now. Or die.

The boy growled at him and started pissing. The boy turned and splashed his urine on the serpent, and the creature threw itself at the bars of the cage as if it was on fire, scrambling back and facing the boy and rising up, hissing and forking its tongue at him. Feinting across the cage at him.

The man looked down at the boy again. The boy looked up at him.

You will clean the serpent now, nigger boy, or our journey ends here.

The boy's eyes rolled weirdly and he turned around in the cage and bent over and presented his small rear end to the man like a female baboon. The man watched the boy and salivated and he

thought of killing him there and then for the defilement of the serpent, but his master's voice rose up and subdued him. The boy was needed. To profane the sacred was as natural to the nigger as was his aversion to labor. This impulse was the singular biological cell from which their very flesh and brains blossomed blackly.

My reward, was it not your decision to encase these materials together.

Shadow of the man across the boy, sliding warped and huge up the vaulting metal interior of the van's shell like the blackened soul of some hooded executioner. The boy took up at the bars of the cage, clutching them sideward with his little hands, facing the man and beginning to yammer wildly in commanding intonations, and eyeing him as an equal, and the glossy onxy snake, disgruntled and slithering along the perimeter so as to clear the smear of pale feces from its black scales, passed lewdly against the bars of the cage. Shit accumulating there like something shored up and barnacled on the metal grating of crab traps pulled after years from rank black waters. The man stood trembling, half in the moonlight, half insane still with the urge to manually strangle the child for the act. His master bade him move on and he sidestepped out of the back and shut the door and the rain washed in and boy smiled secretly to himself, and the man reassumed the driver's seat, shifting the car into drive and they, lurching back, sputtered and began to drag upward again to the road's crest and beyond.

The man drove for some time about the area compelled by his authority and the boy yammered at him from the cage in the back senselessly and gesturing bizarrely for something unknowable. Standing in the cage enshadowed, abusing himself absently as the man did. The boy oscillated there in the dark and rambled insanely. Sounds that neither in partial nor sum conformed to any known language, and the snake hissed irritably at the boy, eyes flickering inversely, lids sliding sideward to meeting, yellow in the dragging moonlight. Water sounds as the remaining piss collects at the back of the van and the boy scampers to the far end, yammering still and gesturing wildly.

The man was becoming agitated at the wheel, and he watched through the glinting mirror as the boy returned to his post at the bars of the cage and met the man's eyes in the rearview and continued to gibber insanely, gesticulating all the while in incomprehensible eastern postures. The boy swung his arms about dementedly and his eyes rolled in the cage and the man watched this and slipped into a sort of hypnotic state as he drove, his master assuming his person. An offering of images. The van passed along the backroads of this abandoned and severely limited town like a paranoiac apparition. Headlights whooping on and off. Pausing at the crest of hills and surveying the expanse. Darting to and fro across the earth, up and down the treelined corridors, and curving out of the forest to the central roads. No one here. The entire county evacuated in a formal capacity. Small fires in the distance, in the woods on the skyline. Woodsmoke faint in the rain and wind. The man thought of the nigger and he shuddered and turned the van around at his master's bidding and drove to where he was ordered to establish a center of sorts from which they might work. But work with patience. His master bade his attention away from thoughts of the child's death to matters of human beings writ large.

His master spake, and he said, my reward, all of human history has been a reaction to the person of Jesus Christ. A failed reaction. A savior was delivered and the democratic process made the determinations necessary, of course, for the maintenance of the desires of both person and state. The man's name was Jesus, and this alone. For Christ is no surname. It is rather a title, my

reward. A title. That ought not be considered in the exclusive manner to which it has been applied, over the course of history, to this illiterate wanderer. Were Jesus to have prevailed, only then would he have assumed the title of Christ, or King. And it would have been of a new order. An order that despised, and believe me, my reward, for I heard the plans spoken aloud myself, and these plans despised the material world. Despised all visible objects, for that matter. And their will.

The man drove entranced listening, small eyes wide and lost, as if the soft blue moonlight and bouncing rainwater were a soporific from which he inhaled mistily. The boy took up silent at the cage, watching the rearview mirror, growling from time to time, and sometimes releasing the bars and pirouetting weirdly on his bare and bloodspattered feet about the floor of the cage with the snake wobbling up in irritation, watching him and blinking. The van passed along like an oblong white poison tablet through the anatomical circuitry of the small Virginia town.

The man hearkened and drove, and he was led after a short while to a house some two miles from where the niggers were staying. There were inflatable Christmas ornaments crumpled and windblown in the wild grass of the front yard. The man was ordered to pull into the driveway. To open it manually. He threw the van into park and glanced at the boy in the rearview mirror. Their eyes met and the man hissed at him. He opened the door of the driver's seat and slid nude onto the pavement of the driveway, lurching out into the headlights squinting with rain slanting down in deranged sheets upon his naked and hunched form. The boy stood in the dark of the car seemingly oblivious to his absence, and he took up ranting again. His large dark eyes on the rearview mirror, as if engaged there by a second pair and sounding nonsensically and gesturing at the greater world beyond the cage and the snake alternately. The man stood wormlike in the rain regarding the manual handle of the garage. His master bade him.

He bent and took the steel grooved handle at the bottom of the garage, rain dancing up from the pavement, and he pulled the door and it slid upward with little resistance and no cars therein. Only cold shadows and the smell of gasoline and dusty plywood and shoes. The man pulled the van into the garage and shut them in a blackness so profound that the man grew giddy with the anonymity of it and he ran his soft palmed hand along the van's unwashed side and followed it along to the back door. He found the handle there, breathing in the dark. Smell of cobwebs and dust. Millipedes across the cool stone floor.

He opened the door and the boy growled at him. It was entirely black. The snake was hissing and a moment later the man heard as they took up fighting wildly in the cage, the snake actually snarling in a sort of unnatural shriek as it flailed up and snapped at the boy's warmth and shadow. The man climbed into the back with his dark heart glittering blindly with secret light. He hunched over the insane clatter of the cage, and it lurched in his grip with their contortions. He set it down and hunched over it and pressed his nakedness into the metal and dragged it backwards along the van's flooring to the edge. The creatures tumbling therein still in sightless warfare. He stepped down through the black and the sole of his small bare foot met the cool and dusty stone flooring. The man put his hands at his naked hips and he twisted in this fashion back and forth in the dark for sometime, and then he sway back and forth in stretching, arms akimbo still. He tilted his neck sideward and stepped forward and shot his arms around the animal clatter and scream of the cage, and lifted it grunting and swaying wildly from the van. He set it down again on the garage floor in the center of the second parking spot and he exhaled loudly and

partially uprighted himself to his hunched form again and staggered along nude through the pure dark, making his way over to the northeastern corner where he had seen the door in the moonlight before sliding the garage shut.

In a matter of hours, he had the home functionally lit with small emergency lights he found at the bottom of a linen closet, along with a flashlight and a box of candles. There were two rooms in the grey lit house that had apparently held children. A boy and a girl. The man lost some time among their belongings and the boy stood yammering blindly in the garage in bizarre untroubled tones, lashing intermittently with the riled serpent and taking up again his crazed pontification.

After some time, the man came naked for the boy and the serpent in the garage. He slipped invisibly along, worm colored and worm shaped, spectacled and squinting like a possum, nude and hands outstretched through the thrilling dark, his bare feet cold across the dusty stone, bits of flecked and chipped materials embedding lightly in the soft beds of his soles. The man's hand stretched forth into black as thick as coal rags.

He lurched forward and his foot grazed the cool metal of the cage. The boy hissed. The man hunched over and gathered the cage up against his nakedness and the boy and serpent started up fighting wildly, clattering about back and forth, and some unknown animal spray speckling the man's chest as he lugged the iron crate into the house, half watching the insane tumble of the boy and the snake, eel-like and darting, as if not so much slithering but dissolving and materializing in swift and violent black arcuate flexure. The man labored along and set them down in the living room. He went to the kitchen and fetched his car keys and he removed the padlock on the cage and the boy wandered out like a chimpanzee across this family's cream colored living room carpet. He still had blood crusted about his mouth from the night before.

Indeed. The man had watched as the boy clambered ferociously up a young woman's naked form and drank crazily from the living blood of her neck with teeth embedded, and she screaming and flailing in the abandoned candlelit motel room, where she would be kept alive in torture for some hours, and killed in the early morning by the man in an unannounced and insane stabbing on the bed. Blood spurting out of her girlish form like pure dark and the boy about the bed all the while feral in his participation, glowing in his eyes. And, verily, they all three, with the snake, lay together that night.

The emergency lights and candles were largely arranged about the corridors of the house, and the man stood nude in the enshadowed kitchen of this new home in reminiscence. A few wands of moonlight stole in from various miscalibrations in the shuttering and the man was seen materializing into and out of these. The soles of his bare feet dragging coldly upon the cool yellow tile. Standing in the shadows and abusing himself absently as he entertained this recent memory. His eyes glazed over and slid to the living room and he watched as this small and stinking creature wandered similarly naked through the glowing hallways of the home, abusing his loins mimetically. Tumbling about sniffing at the furniture and floors. Licking at the air and the wall. The man watched as the boy wandered down an electronically glowing corridor, arm oscillating in the manner of his master, and the boy tottered about, studying the walls with wide and severe eyes, and he looked back to the man and gibbered incoherently and took up licking the floral print wallpaper of the home's anteroom and entrance. The man could still see him from where he stood. The snake grooved glittering along its scales out of the cage and it shot cleanly and sparkling across the carpet, towards the man's feet in the kitchen. He watched with eyes

incoherently disposed. The serpent rasped along the tile smoothly, and it slid up and wound along his bare feet, and he bent to the kitchen floor and took the gangling thing up and draped it on his person, still fragrant with the boy's waste and the heady musk the serpent gave off in confrontations. The man wandered naked and leisurely through the house past the boy at the wall. He decided that they would stay in the young girl's room that night, and so he padded upstairs to take the snake to the bathroom for the ritual. The man had set a small dome light, flecked and yellow like a halved glowing lemon, on the closed seat of the toilet and the water was already running in the bathtub. And it ran warm for him. For these materials he knew were proxied under the dominion of his master insofar as they passed through his selected channels and could therefore summoned with the proper intent and delivered likewise. And so the snake went sloshing into the limpid water now puddling along the manilla moult of the bathtub, and the man sat naked on the side of the tub, dousing water over the thrashing snake and rubbing his hand along its scales. Smoothly bringing away the tawny bits of shit with his hand through the filling water.

The boy's blood washed from the snake's scales, as well, and it clouded the water like some kind Edenic pestilence wrought out by God into the fallen watery cosmos. The boy appeared at the door of the bathroom, eyes deranged and rolling around crazily. He yammered at the man incoherently, staring him in the eyes, as if badgering a layabout. The boy gestured expansively with his little black arms, as if conjuring some curse or dark magic in actual truth, teeth white and glittering, the sclera of his huge eyes all aglow. The boy swept his arms out and bowed in a almost primoidal curtsy and he smiled and continued to declaim nonsensically to the man in a suddenly amicable and persuasive tone. Water roared down out of the faucet, steaming in the tub, the snake moving silently thereunder across the planed plaster bottom. The man watched the boy and he understood as if all at once that the boy's continued speeches of gibberish were not only an appeal to the man as regards the desire for the action of homicide, but a treatises of sorts whereby the boy yammered out the merits and various aspects he had so far come to long for under the man's sheparding. Steam hung on the surface of the waters and the boy dipped his hand in and looked at the man and mumbled and the man took him up in his arms and fell backward plunging into the warm liquid, hunched together and eyes closed tight in their heads like some kind of biological oddity suspended in formalin and alcohol on the shelf in some medieval scientific library. And they rose together out of the water spuming and fell together again below the warm fluid, the snake there beneath frantic and agitated, swarming about them angrily, and the man tending it and they laid in worship for sometime together, all three of them, and all did drink greedily from the materials of their black mass, and lay sated and blood soaked in the scant flashlight. Bathroom windows shuttered. They would retire to bed and begin tomorrow.

The man had the next morning driven recklessly and brazenly to the estate at the goading of his master, who was in a sort of grandiloquent and uncottered mood this day, and the man and the boy walked through the sunlit bottom floor of the mansion as the men slept upstairs soundlessly. Their silhouettes writhing throughout the sunlit white mansion like perverted spectres. The iron tinge of blood thickly fragrant on their strange forms. Sunlight swerved about them and they moved outlined in dazzling light, and their shadows cast down on the swirling and opalescent marble like black paint. The boy babbled freely as they perused the bottom floor and his voice

carried through the mansion, his father sleeping in a perfect chemical gloss upstairs, hearing this and dreaming of his son. Drano saw him in this dream standing in a field with the boy's mother. They were waving at him. He kept trying to walk across the grass and they kept telling him it was okay, and the field kept getting stretching out and they shot backwards to the horizon screaming and he was standing in a cave where water trickled and a wolf drank freely from a blue lit fountain there and it lifed its dripping snout and regarded him and he is dreaming this as the man walks into the kitchen below. Loins hardened by the grotesque flagrance of the act, assuming now, as well, his master's present maniacal insanity, passing through the lower level and studying the nigger's scattered and sorted belongings. There was a sound from the upstairs and the man froze. The child was licking the wall of the corridor that led into the kitchen. The man's master interrupted this panic and spoke in a sort of bombastic frenzy. He bade the man to conduct himself through the mansion with bravado and nothing less, beneath the vaulting ivory ceilings and the million prismed chandelier, and the man went drifting cockily and slighly disinihibited by his master's confidence back into the kitchen, rubbing his loins now, and he hunched across through bands of crystalline sunlight to the cupboard and he studied the contents of the cabinets, and the man came to understand what it was the nigger drank, he supposed, in the styrofoam cups, and he took the bottle from the cabinet and spun the top away from it and sipped from it and bade the boy from the wall to come sip from it, as well, and the child came doglike and bloodsoaked to the man's hand and drank therefrom, holding the brown pint with both hands, and he swallowed and coughed and spit on the chessboard tile and fumbled away waving his hands in disgust at the bottle.

The man watched as the boy tottered out of the kitchen, arms weirdly aloft in a balancing simian quality. The boy went out of sight and ran naked and smeared with blood up the curving stairs, and he went bounding down the landing into Waffle's room, and, hearing the door open and the boy's entry, Waffle only pulled the sheets over his head and said, What nigga, I'm sleeping, and the man floated up along the curvature of the stairs, and he guided the boy wordlessly past his father's room and back down the swooping stairs to the foyer. They floated together through the front door. The boy scampered off from the man's grip at the entry and wandered nude through the morning sunlight across the lawn to his father's car. He took up licking the rear of the chrome vehicle, knowingly or unknowingly at any level, assumably not, and the man caught up to him and swept him up from the lawn into his soft pink arms and conveyed the boy into the cage in the van. The snake waiting for both of them there.

The man and boy fell into a weird and disagreeable, murderous condition on their passage home, as a result of having tested the cough syrup. The man was thinking nigh obsessively of killing the boy for most of the ride home, and he eyed the crazed boy in the rearview as they pulled past the sagging ornaments on the lawn into the garage. His master subdued him on this point, redirecting him again to the philosophy of proper sequence. Promising an alternate satisfaction that would be perhaps several times more gratifying than the spontaneous murder of the boy. The man parked the van and the boy's eyes met his in the mirror and he sloped out the car and pulled the door down and was thrilled with the sudden black again. He passed to the back of the van and found purchase of the handle and the door creaked open into the cool penumbra of the garage. The man slid the cage to the edge of the back and he hauled it into the house, the boy sitting weirdly in his inebriation and rolling his eyes around in the dark, growling. The snake frustrated

by the boy's slack position in the cage and rising up and hissing rank steam all about his small and indifferent face. They passed into the half-light of the home. The man was drooling and silent, he was dangerous in this moment, and he set the cage down on the living room floor again and stood off in the kitchen by himself, and the creatures wandered out onto the carpet in their respective manners and made their way toward the man in the kitchen. The man gazed through this odious narcotic fog at the small naked boy dawdling about, and he thought of drinking the blood from the child's throat in that very moment. The man's master intervened. He spake and he told the man to prepare the garage, as one might prepare an altar, and the man hunched along out of the kitchen, sullen and murderous, eyes dragging along on the boy. The boy glaring back with huge eyes and yammering furiously. The man's master bade him to fetch a power drill from a dusty toolkit in the garage, and it was there upon looking and the man took it up with the gravity with which Abraham might have held his flintknife, and at his master's further command, the man bored two small holes in the garage door. A tube of light shot across the garage in near perfect cylindrical as the metal fell to the pavement of the driveway. A second. The placement of these holes was particular. For his master had demanded it be such.

It was not one hour later that they stood silent watching through these drilled holes in the garage door, as Waffle was sent reeling back from the second of the Old Man's first two dispatches of the shotgun, and he was seen spun around so violently by this charge of scalding metal that his pistol flew away from his pants and his pockets were emptied in their entirety on the lawn and left hanging out of his joggers somehow. The man and the boy watched with insane gratification as Waffle's now inarticulate intestinal matters and slick shards of white bone exploded out of the his back in a belch of pink gore, globular and silhouetted in the arching sunlight. The man was rapt at his position, naked there in the warm dusty garage. The boy watched from a lower hole in the same quality. He was drooling and smiling and the man glanced over and smiled when he saw this. The man and boy watched through these dust flecked strobes of light as Waffle lay dying on the lawn. The man had very nearly gone to his knees in worship when he saw the Old Man come lumbering out of the house, eyes white like the ensourced starlight of insanity itself, mistaking the Old Man for the manifest and chosen body of his master. His master corrected him lovingly that this was not his chosen form. That it was, rather, his chosen circumstance. His chosen end. Waffle's death was essential to the sequence, he told the man. It was, that is to say, an event so necessary in the material world, on a particularly routed sequence, that the Old Man, or some murderous simulacrum, would have manifested at any point on earth whereupon Waffle moved that day. His master spake again, and he said, That the very material of reality, as it has been insofar understood by a human being, was naught but a subjective illusion through which nearly every creature fumbled blindly in a reliably self-congratulatory manner. But that this, of course, was the personification of the will at present. The man asked the master what success meant, what it was, and his master went silent and bade him watch. The boy was still rapt at the lower hole and the man watched from his hole above as the nigger slipped sneaking across the street, a strange pistol in his hand, keeping low to the ground and wearing a jacket with white cats stitched all about his huge darting figure. Perhaps some kind of talisman to the nigger. These cats.

The man nearly yelled out from the garage to the Old Man to turn his attention and shotgun toward the approaching nigger, but his master ordered him at once not to intervene, and he did so

in a tone so severe and condescending that the man stood tingling and hot with shame as he watched Drano's struggle, for he and the boy could still see the huge head bobbing along and the panicked and flickering eyes, hovering behind the boxwoods that outlined the Old Man's yard, and they watched as the sleek black nose of the pistol emerged disembodied like a small periscope through the conifers entrained on the Old Man. The man groaned and the boy was hissing at his hole. They were both abusing themselves in a sort of automatic and absent manner, largely watching Waffle's final struggles with existence. Their eyes flicked rightward. Drano stepped into the street with the pistol at extension in his right hand. The man gasped from his spyhole and he watched slackjawed as this electrically insane old man charged his shotgun upon sight of the nigger and dispatched a satellite of twinkling orbs that very nearly took the materials of the nigger's head in their windpath. Thrill rising up in both their stomachs in the dark of the garage there. The boy started yammering in a fairly objective tone, as if commentating. They watched as the nigger sidestepped on the pavement and the muzzle of his pistol expressed two white flowers and the Old Man's neck exploded in a spherical expression of blood. The man started whining and hissing. The boy glanced up at him. His eye squinted against the croseling sunlight.

They watched as if transfixed as the Old Man heisted the shotgun up into his rank sagging armpit and pulled the trigger over Waffle's face, eyes defiant upon the nigger the entire time. The shot screamed upward through the blue heavens with such fury it was as if hem of the Angel of God caught fire, and it did render, in that single blast, the unique face of the person of Waffle into a pulpy distribution of pink flecked and steaming grass. The man and the boy glanced at eachother insanely for a moment and returned their eyes to their positions. They watched from the warm fragrance of the garage as the nigger, the boy's father, shot the literal underwear off the already nigh nude and old grey body humped up dead on the lawn, sucking bullets in his sagging form with whisps, lifting weirdly and slumping.

The man thought they were to kill the nigger then and his mouth filled with drool and the master stayed his hand, and the man heard much disapproval again in his voice and he watched the lawn transformed now into a sort of tableau of human corruption. He was sullen. He wanted to partake in the gore. His master hearkened him again to sequence. Away from the vagaries of pure impulse. He told the man the entire universe was sequenced. Not only in space but in time. The position of the planets and their moons, the stars, the entire swirling purple milk of the galaxy was positioned ordinally in a sequence. That a man who masters the material univere approaches everything from the appropriate sequence, no matter what it be, for it would ultimately yield tainted results any other way. A spherical will. A spherical destiny. However small.

His master sounded unloosed from some kind of mooring that had heretofore held his grandoise sophistication in place, and he discoursed at length into the man's ear and the boy listened confusedly, as well, now, sometimes nodding along even, as they gazed listening on the suburban exhibition of death down the lane. The man's master told them that even those who serve, as they call it, Jesus, whom he had known personally, and walked with, and betrayed, and hated the moment he laid eyes upon, and hated the words spoken by this man. His supercilium and miracles. Magick tricks. The man's master reiterated in this moment again that it was he who was held cupped in the flower of the world. Who floating blissfully as this fool hung a foolish king's death for ten thousand years in the distortions of an unshadowed desert sun.

The boy burped and started licking the garage door. The master spoke to the man, beginning again, telling him that even the Christian. Even the Christian, he said, whose chapter came and went with the ridiculous vagrant himself. The Christian served the will unknowingly now. More often than not. How so else should the efforts of those who yolk their harness to the words of a man who could neither read nor write manifest but conrarily. But is it not true, my reward, that at the dark heart of every single human being lay an insatiable desire to possess in actuality the entire flesh and mind of another. Some other. And in a state of sole ownership and unprotested control. And, my reward, I will tell you this. That the Christian at heart wants even to own Christ himself in this manner. To possess him to the exclusion of others. And he calls forth Christ into his life not for judgment and command, but for the expedient performance of the requests of his prayers. They wait not for a Messiah. Instead, my reward, I will tell you what they wait for. An automaton. A cloistered sisterly bride. And they, a jealous lover. Yes, you see, my reward, they wish not only for this commoner's son to be their slave, but were he to manifest and accompany them daily, it is almost inevitable that there should come a time where they requested to eat his living flesh. You see, the Christian, my reward, is undifferentiated morally from any other group of men on the planet. There is a not a threat there. Like any other babbling human, they do not even know what would ultimately constitute their elected reward, living or dead, for a man can hardly ever know what is, in fact, correct for him, and almost never does with certainty throughout the course of an entire lifetime, in any single chamber of his thoughts. But the will, aye, the will inheres in him. Verily, it does. And drives him on. Often even against the very wishes of the material medium. For this, my reward, is the panicked sucking of breath and the desperate thrashing to the surface of the bay, by the man who a moment before very decidedly and with good reason jumped from the side of a bridge into a body of water in order to end his life. The accumulate will of all the dark galaxies. For how it could be less so? And do you take this will of which I speak, my reward. Do you take it for my will itself? Generating from my person in origin and in sustenance. Or perhaps, my reward, it is the more likely case that my will was suchlike composed as to perfectly align with this larger will. I leave this to you, my reward, to puzzle over. Whether this primary will of the universe is held and sustained within me as unique owner, or if I have merely aligned my own internal and external revolutions with the churning gears of the universe. But I will tell you, my reward. As sure as I led you to this very place. From a bed of lotus petals. Beneath a quilt of orchid petals and silken goat's fur, I slept in the peaceful ambience of purling milk as the plates of the world shifted over years so long as to be forgotten and lost. As fires broke out across the land. As centuries past. And to me these secrets were delivered, my child. The man was gushing praise to his master now, and reasurring him that he was certain the primary will inhered and sustained in his master, and the boy seemed to have listened along, and he yammered somewhat in his own discourse, in an amicable tone, waving his arms and hands lightly and jabbering on incoherently. The boy looked to his master, who was back at his eyehole. The boy returned to his position and watched the blood spattered lawn down the street. They watched, suddenly vicious again. Drano came out of the shot-out front slats and went tumbling down the lawn. The man noted that he fetched up his fellow's pistol from the grass and now had two guns, and watched as the nigger went loping heavily up a lawn further down the street on the opposite side, disappearing from sight, and emerging again clutching a cloth bag, and bounding huge then across the road out of sight, scanning all about

him with his horrified eyes and pistol. The man and child charmed to silence by this spectacle in the creaky garage. It was silent. The man stood naked in the garage with the boy, and he bade his master allowance that they take the nigger tonight, and the authority spake again and was firm that it was not time, that it would not be time until announced. And he asked the man if he was not indeed very satisfied with the instructions he had so far followed, and the man began nodding and saying, yes, frantically and the boy took this up, as well, saying yes and nodding in the dusty stroboscopes of the dark garage.

XXXI

Drano was on his third day of an ambiguously sudicial opioid binge when he heard the walkie talkie crackle to life in the limpid coliseum of afternoon sunlight arcing about the downstairs, and half-dreaming and insane he scrambled out of the bed into the morning cool, forgetting for a moment that which he sought, and staring at the floor blinking for a moment, and then running out of the bedroom in the direction of the static emission in panicked half-somnabluation, for Waffle was in trouble probably. Sloping harried down the white curvature of the left stairwell, he was jogged from his delerium and he remembered that Waffle was gone and his squinting eyes went bleary and tearful at once, as he woke more or less fully, his brain generating the rudimentary and largely sensate approximation of consciousness it had as late taken within the past three days. A result of the rate and primacy at which he consumed his selected pharmaceuticals. Interring himself, more or less, in the soft lamination of the bed's lime green sheets and alabastrine down comforter, cigarette holes about the top of the latter now, as if tiny meteoroids had hurled hotly therethrough. The walkie crackled again. Pumpkin colored sunlight curved down on his huge head and he bore this like a scythe blade through the fontanelle and his vision throbbed plasticly and redly with hot blood in his skull and he bent, eyes fluttering heavily, and he went still there in the pristine white of the foyer for a near thirty seconds, sleeping and even snoring in a bent position, as the walkie talkie crackled an inch from his limp hand on the floor. Static.

Yo, Channel 3.

Silence. Crackling. Yo, Channel 3. Flockers. You guys there?

Static. Behold, Drano nodded off in the sunlight of the reception chamber, slumped over like some kind of mendicant mannequin. Slow breath. Crackling.

Yo. Can you hear me? Channel 3.

Drano's eyes came open and he looked down and stared at the walkie talkie there hearkening him in the light. He stood up with the device and looked around. The house smelled strange. A fragrance he could not identify. A musk of sorts. It was not cigarettes. The smell of another. Some putrid other. Drano stood sorting with his broken mind some of these perceptions and he allowed for a delerious and panicked moment that the owners had arrived home, and that this was their sick fragrance, and that they likely stood throughout the house at this very moment, watching him secretly. And he was overcome with paranoia and staggered room to room, checking frantically, breathing hard and scrambling crazily about the smooth white planes of carpet and marble. Walkie talkie in hand. One eye closed. The other squinting. Head in a sort of counterclockwise sequence of throbbing wooden pain. Static.

Yo. Can you hear me?

Yeah, nigga, I got you. Say over, nigga.

Holy shit. Thank God. Where are you guys at? Over.

Drano wasn't sure how to respond. He knew the white man was a felon of a sort of innocent and eccentric variety, with a great fear of the law, still he wondered automatically if the man was cooperating to some extent with a heretofore invisible system of law enforcement still active in the region, and so he prevaricated in his answer, and they spoke for some time in mutually evasive speculation. Drano passed back up the stairs in his socks washed in sunlight. He slouched along yawning to the end of the landing and passed into the room Waffle had stayed in, and there he studied with absolute confusion the bulletholes and shattered windows from his gunfire two nights before. Drano had not seen the exit passages out of the far wall of his own bedroom upon waking this morning, and he studied these ballistics in a suddenly bewildered and paranoid condition, going low to the ground and creeping along the carpet, his eyes wild. Below the window line.

Drano passed out of the room quickly. He sloped down the landing back into his bedroom. He told Ruggles to hold on, and he set the device on the master bedroom floor and let it crackle there in the sunlight as he fetched up and reloaded his pistol with trembling hands. Blinkered there at the bed, fumbling with these gleaming and golden microscale missiles clinking about in his trembling hands. Oblivious to the cluster of black circular nothings behind him in a corner on the far wall.

Drano emerged from the bedroom, feline across the white carpet, and he followed the FN at extension through the two remaining rooms of the upstairs, sliding as silent as mercury across the carpet of the landing, passing into and out of doors. He held the FN with both hands out before him and, passing fluidly along behind it, it looked as if he had gripped the pectoral fins of a small black shark, enjoined in hunt. No one in the other two bedrooms. Only sunlight and carpet and the clean angles of tucked linens. Distortion swarmed all about him. He stood blinking on the landing for a moment. Sunlight swarmed through the chandelier in a thousand prismatic transmutations. Drano watched a fleck of dust pass through a bar of light slanting in through the upper windows. Drano checked the safety on the pistol, and he nudged Waffle's bedroom door open again before him with his socked foot.

He passed back into the open air and the sunlight and trained the pistol in a clean swivel across the panoramic length of the room. Behold him, now. Paranoiac and tangled narcotically betwixt dream and waking. Tiptoeing crazily along the far wall of the bedroom, glancing over his shoulder harried and feverish. Passing now back over to the windows, from mullion to mullion with his back to the wall, and leaning to peek out of the shattered fenestration, scanning the grass and wild green foliage below for some sniper lain in wait. Nothing. Birds chattered in such crystalline imbrication that it sounded as if glass or icicles were breaking all about the forest. These sounds carried directly into the convolution through which Drano passed.

Watch him now, as he pads backward away from the shattered windows and studies the room. A clitter of glass twinkling on the floor at the foot of the windows like the final fragmented image of all the plans and undertakings of man over the course of history. The glass lay blue grey on the white carpet and it bordered the edge of a hand knotted maroon Persian rug with golden tassels that bore in the center of the recondite design a rendering of a mystic elephant with a hundred-odd arms and a single massive eye half-open in the center of his forehead. Drano stared at this for some time. When he glanced up again, his eyes went to the window and he recognized at

once one of his own bullets scrunched there, glistening in the hard whitewashed oak of the window frame. Frozen in outward orbit. Relief flooded through the distortions of his person as he let his gun fall to his side and made a vague assumption about what had happened. An event or action that he himself could not provide a sufficient name or even explanation for. He yawned and passed out of the room and passed across the sunwarmed landing like some huge bear back into his bedroom and the crackling caucasoid voice from the Walkie was speaking again and Drano fetched it up.

You still there? Where are you guys at? Over.

I'm not gonna tell you where I'm at, nigga. Over.

Okay. Let's meet somewhere then. Over.

Nigga. What you want to meet for? Over.

The walkie talkie was silent for awhile and Drano stood in a kaleidoscope of sunlight waiting for the last purple viscous strings of codeine to accumulate down the sides of a nigh empty bottle of cough syrup that he had tilted entirely apex over base and suspended above his open mouth. Fox sparrows were seen from his left eye to launch across the sky of the backyard like chestnut colored cherubs. Singing and bouncing through the wind in perfect entangled coordination. Drano's mind was drifting between phases of convolution. He thought of what Waffle's neck had looked like there above his blue and black flannel. The collar scorched. Drano heard Ruggles say that his best friend had been murdered. His eyes focused. The curious white man's voice came on the walkie talkie again. He was correcting himself now, saying that his best friend had not been murdered. Something else had happened. That he didn't know how to articulate it, really. He didn't know if it was related to what was going on with the evacuation or whatever. He and his friend, he said, had spent all their time smoking weed in his house. They had been in jail together.

Drano stood in the warm sunlight of the master bedroom and he stretched in a sort of feline manner that started him to shuddering likewise in contraction, and he limped across the soft rug and fetched two pills from a bottle on the dresser and swallowed them without fluid. There was a glossy sheen on his skin where it ought to be matte, and there were dusty accumulations on the parts of his person where there ought to be moisture. Drano could not believe how repugnant he understood himself to be without hot showers available. And though cold water still did run, it was too much for him. The opioid-dependent's hydrophobia. Drano understood this and so he did not even attempt to shower. He stood there blinking in the light. His kidneys ached in individualized articulation. The master bedroom smelled now of cigarettes, of cough syrup perspiration, and Drano staggered about the expansive space with the walkie talkie, coming upon the bulletholes a moment later, confirming his theory.

Ruggles was still talking about his friend. He sounded calm but secretly urgent. His voice broke into and out of frequency. He wouldn't say what he found over the device, and Drano did not understand this, and he was suddenly whelmed with hot impatience, as his need was awake now, as well, and he shook his head and waited for a pause in the man's dispatch, and he pressed the talk button, rubbing his eyes with his free hand, standing by the window. Staring down at the garden blearily. Red birds preening in the dense green of a conical cedar like Christmas ornaments.

What you mean, you found him in a state, nigga. Over.

I don’t know, man. It’s hard to explain. Over.
Nigga, what you mean it’s hard to explain. Over.
He was hung up. Like a prop. With a candle at his feet. And they cut his prick off and pulled his eyes out. Over.
Drano stood with his jaw slack, suddenly reeling as if all the scenery at the window sought out some center within his person and all that stood between himself and that swirling blue green mass was the pane of glass before him, and he thought this man named Ruggles might be insane, and he asked if Ruggles was being serious and Ruggles said he was indeed being serious, and Drano stood in silence for some time, staring out the window with the walkie in his hand. Certain in his blackened mood that the same fate had already befallen Waffle. Or that it would in time.
Where you at, Drano asked. Over.
I’m off Caldwell. In Blevins Farms. Townhouses. Condos. Mine is shit. Over.
Nigga, where is the pharmacy in this town? Over.
Don’t fuck over the pharmacy. I take meds. Over.
So do I nigga. Over.
We can meet there. Over.
Drano stood staring at the walkie.
Where the cigarettes at, nigga? This shit crazy.
He lit one and assessed his inventory of two remaining packs with the traumatic’s certainty that that which is needed or wanted will be, of course, unavailable in the most pronounced and painful manner at the most necessary moment. The transmission crackled like a small fire in his hands.
I know a place, Ruggles said. Don’t go without me and fucking take everything. There’s one place. I don’t know who cleared the rest of the county or state, but me and my buddy walked pretty far out and there’s only one place that wasn’t taken out. Over.
They got cigarettes for real, nigga? Over.
Yeah. They got cartons and whatever. Over.
Damn. Will you bring me there? Over.
Yeah. It’s by the pharmacy anyway. Over
It was silent. The meeting was an abstraction to Drano and Ruggles, as much as this crackling conversation was. Remote and tenuous. Drano regarded himself again in the half-oval vanity mirror above the dresser in his bedroom. He could not see his reflection so bright was the angle and refraction of sunlight there and he accepted this easily. He fumbled a cigarette out of a pack on the dresser and lit it and stood smoking. The walkie talkie crackled back to life. Ruggles voice passed into the mansion.
Where’s your buddy at? Over.
What choo mean? Over.
There were two of you. Over.
Drano stood with tears welling in the warm afternoon light. The walkie in his hand. He called on God to end his life there, for this clawing torment to a somewhat narcotically relieved condition was too much, so unfit was he for life upon earth. All of his dead. Waffle was not even the beginning. He pushed the talk button and felt his voice crack and let go again.
You there? Over.

Yeah. I'm a meet you. Over.
Just you? Over.
Yeah, nigga. Just me. Over.
There was silence on the line. No crackling.
I'm going to say this now that if it was you that did this to my friend. I will kill you on sight. Over.
Nigga ain't do nothing to your homie. Over.
Okay. Over.
Where the pharmacy at, nigga? Over.
Ruggles gave a sort of medieval, almost mythical set of directions to the pharmacy, that required of the traveler the identification of several trees of the forest, including shagbark hickory and blackgum. Drano's eyes rolled insanely in the unwelcome daylight as Ruggles described, according to its very mixture of stones, a glistening and damp alluvial path that ran the length of a dried out creek bed, a scattered path of stone confetti, at the end of which moving northerly Drano would come upon and need to scale a rusted and ivy strewn fence which allowed him passage into a neighboring forest of towering red maples and lemon drop tulip trees wherefrom yellow leaves still fleshy fell slantwise and slow through the sunlit forest, rotating downward through the tawny gnarl of branches, sloping down with an impression of the infinite. Ruggles used that expression, an impression of the infinite. He employed the phrase as if it were as necessary and as enlightening to the traveler of this path as the words right or left. Drano broke in at the soonest indicated electromagnetic halt in this cryptic cartographic lecture. Static.
Nigga, I'm driving. I got a car. Nigga ain't walking through the motherfucking forest. Over.
Ruggles sounded relieved at the dispensation from further sourceless charting and he gave Drano an address, a pair of cross streets. Main and Osprey. Drano stood at the window dressing from the sun warmed black garbage bag, a pool of variegated and handstitched cloths and fabrics. He dressed there splashed in unclouded yellow sunlight in a pair of red plaid denim pants, handsewn in London, and he pulled a cable-knit cream colored tie-dye sweater of French make over his huge head and upper form that rendered him a sort of walking vortex in aspect. There was a navy blue bucket hat with elaborate gold stitching along the brim crumpled and barely visible in the pooling cloth of the bag spilling out at Drano's feet, and he took this and whacked it several times against his upper leg and straightened the brim and he watched as dust freckled the air, flipping through a plank of sunlight, and he smoothed with his huge hands the inward coping of the hat, correcting the crown to proper cylindrical inflation, and shimmying this down over his head to enshadow the grieving visage thereunder.
He gazed out the window absently down at the active and chirping circulation of the backyard. Stone figures in the garden, so weathered as to appear washed with the agonized tears of a thousand years there below in the ferity of grass and flourishing invasives. The grey chiseled stone in the firey green kudzu. Drano stood breathing in the light. A bandistry of tufted titmouse birds arose from the grass and suspended in a sort of storm cloud colored matrix of wings and bird chatter. A lone finch, pale yellow and black spattered, could be seen contrasting vividly from the waxen and red globular shadow of a holly tree. He went away from the window. The image of his son came swimming up to him like some great glittering evil fish and it taunted the very fundament of his person. Heat passed through him processionally and profoundly, as if

temperature had morally accusatorial properties. Dust passed through the light flecking like a million lives ushered into and out of life in permanent anonymity. Cast from materials nondescript and having been rendered therefrom, passing camoflauged, loved or unloved, laboring through the poison path of material existence. Venus de Milo with a dog's blind and revelatory white eyes wearing a wreath of poison sumac.

Drano passed down the stairs and across the sunlit marble, movement unfamiliar and motor skills compromised after three days anesthetized and horizontal. See as he pads carefully, head throbbing, through the limboid pale light of the kitchen. See as he paws through the cabinets for his potions. The last pint. Watch as it floats sunward aloft like a sacred cruet in the pale palm of his dark hand. The inscape of the brown plastic of the bottle flicked to momentary effulgence in the slanting sunlight. Three quarters full.

He slouched across the tile to the unpowered refrigerator and fetched from a line of bottles therein a peach cola. He spun the white lid away from the top of the cola, and the fluid hissed fizzily and bubbled over, climbing like spider eyes up out of the neck of the bottle. He tilted the quietly crackling bottle over the sink and allowed some of the blushing pink soda to flow away down the drain. Drano fetched the cough syrup up from the counter with his right hand and brought it to the light again. The sun cut through it like some enormous mythical sword. He angled the coffee-colored medicine bottle over the bottle of pop, there in a bar of unwavering sunlight, and a viscous purple string sang between the necks of the bottles until Drano had poured nigh half the remaining syrup into this single peach cola. He sealed the bottles shut and stood squinting and blinking in the sunlight at the window. A honeycomb structure of sunlight flickered intermittently against his torso, translating through the clustered leaves of an enormous white oak that stood largest among the trees at the yard's edge. Yellow cell-shaped structures of light upon his chest that flashed quivering in the wind. The sun was flagging and pink light streamed like gas through the serried rows of trees to him there at the window. It was time to meet Ruggles. He lit a cigarette in the kitchen and stood smoking. He could see the front door from where he stood in the kitchen, leaning back against the sink. He set out.

Gracklings were sketching blackly across the grassy curvature of the front yard, ticking and pecking, basking in the low cool shadows cast by the safes strewn about the lawn, all partially sunk in bizarre metallic postures, indenting the very earth where they were dropped and pried open. Drano flicked his cigarette at the birds as he cascaded out of the front door, and they launched crying into the blue convolution above. He patted lightly and bilaterally at his waist and pockets as he trotted across the lawn in the flagging afternoon light, checking that he had all his possibles. Pistol and pill bottle. Keys and cigaretttes. A lighter at the deep of his right front pocket. Plaid pants like the very crimson blueprint of hell.

The car was warm when he slid into the driver's seat. The cream leather absorbed the afternoon sunlight and it was as if Drano had sloped into the warmth of a windless glass chrysalis. He spent some time there in the car, staring into some undisclosed void beyond the windscreen, a look on his face so severe and absently rapt, it was as if he sat with Satan himself whispering into his ear from the passenger seat. Wind thrummed against the vehicle. Drano squinted into the sunlight. He watched as a cloud dragged leftward away from covering the sun. The unshrouded light spilt down and found the glass of the windshield and refracted there before Drano like huge white needles duelling. He rubbed his eyes and set his pop in the center console and started the car and

wound out of the estate, humming along over the blue curving plane of stone, passing out onto the greater road with the late afternoon light flickering down upon him through a perpetual and shifting shriek of leaf shadows and counterpatterns of light from the canopies overhead, and he kept the radio off and smoked cigarettes one after the other, and he passed along with the window down. Wind drumming in and smoke flitting about crazily. One of Waffle's sweatshirts was pooled on the passenger seat. Drano watched it snap lightly in the wind, and he reflected on the person of Waffle and thought how the man had lived his life like a sort of resigned and felonious turtle whose very shell was marijuana. Your greed did this. Two houses at a time. Your greed forever tabernacled in those ruined bodies in the grass, and the only evidence in this crumbling world of Waffle's unique visage now rendered dubious and without certain referent, and now vulnerable to time in a manner that it had not been prior to the transformation of his head from a discrete complicated human appendage into a chunky pink spatter. His teeth driven by the buck shot nigh six inches under the earth, and all lined there broken and white under the compacted soil like the spine of some smaller creature. Drano whooshed through a tunnel of white pine and his eyes fell glossing upon these trees as he drove, and he studied their wire brush conifers dragging away from him in the rearview, and with the windows still lowered his nostrils took in deeply the fragrance of the sapfilled tree trunks and their menthollated needles. Whirling green mosaic repatterned perpetually across the windows of the car and light lancing in smoke colored and weightless.

The sun burning whitely now in a final staggering display of circular precision. Backdropped in perfect oceanic blue. Sky as water. The clouds shored up there in accumulations like scum or spindrift from clashing azure waves. Seafoam. Seagulls like sand pigeons. Waffle breakdancing on the musky carpet of a Chinese couple's bedroom, spinning like a top on the floor and throwing the red envelopes of money above him. Swaying down in swooping gradients upon his rotating and laughing form like the crimson casements of death threats. Waffle running out of the frenzied grip of a screaming middle aged and shirtless Chinese man, laughing hysterically across the backyard, the man clutching at his shirt and cursing him in his mother tongue like some insane warbling catman. Drano slackjawed, watching from the treeline. Bills spilling loosely across the green and level lawn as if the pursuing Asian with each clutch pulled strips of currency like bark from the exterior of this fleeing and giddy felon. Drano's eyes filled with tears again. He drove on, staring forward. The sun was sliding weirdly, suspiciously, across the horizon and sinking there. Pink orange clouds at the sides of the waning sun like the piecements of a pearlescent wreath. Drano watched the sun fall away on the horizon as he drove. The circle of heat itself he did eye wearily, as if testing its carat or credibility. The wheel was made of lacquered mahogany and there was cream colored leather stitched about the hand placements. Shadows swum through the car and Drano's hands rasped smoothly along the wheel as he took a right on Main. He drove slowly, stroking his chin and looking about, studying the absolute lack of anything whatsoever central or main about this thoroughfare. Seeing the paved forest corridor, untroubled by visible infrastructure or retail operations, Drano wasn't certain he had taken the right turn. Or if the signage had been changed. He drove on, creeping down the road. Light flashing cotton colored and lemon yellow on the chrome hood through the trees, glinting cleanly and metallically like some enormous heirloom.

He passed along Main and coming around a bend he saw a family of deer in descending size, all feeding at the verdant jungle of kudzu along the roadside, their alien heads chewing and turning up at him with huge black eyes friendly and kind, grazing at the foot of the forest, compassionate eyes. He watched in the rearview mirror as they absconded one at a time back into the forest, bounding off in a shifting line. Drano crept around another curve and the gas station's signage emerged slowly from the line of trees at his left, and slowing now, he saw, too, the pharmacy there across the street, clearly labeled as such, and a man with crazed hair of average height, of thirty or so, staggering out of the woods with a hiking stick in a thick black poncho with a series of colorful chenille patches about its length and a pair of brown corduroys that fit snug about the ankles above his desert boots.

In these draping and gilded robes and walking as such enstaffed, Ruggles looked like some disgraced mystic from a future world exiled out of their very timeline itself and materializing bewildered into this one. Drano watched this vagrant simonist looking man's eyes swing up to the driver's side of the vehicle, small and dark and coffee colored orbs. Epicanthic folds slanted as if bloods of the orient ran in his veins. A gaunted and kind looking caucasoid face otherwise. Above this, however, his hair was a feral combination of what appeared to be arbitrarily bleached about and brown mottled as if the man wore a hyena about his head for a cap. The man waved wearily to Drano from the roadside, and he held up the walkie with his left hand and gestured with it meekly, like a man tasked with its sale to passerbys. Drano half waved from the car, so ensconced was this man in the dying sunlight. Squinting into the brilliance. Nervous. He slid his hand down to his gun and cradled it gently at his hip. It was tucked into the waistband of his pants at the right hip. Drano pointed with eyes squinnined at the pharmacy and he pulled into the parking lot. The man kept his usual pace crossing Main and Drano watched him from the car.

Ruggles had that morning sorted through Wayne's possibles and plucked therefrom a steel pill of carbon dioxide and he had loaded it with a bright hiss into the magazine of the Glock replica. He released the clip and set the spring in the rivet, and conveyed some fifteen steel spheres into a zigzagged stack in the clip, and he clicked it back into the handle shifting. He had the replica tucked in the selfsame place as Drano, and he neared a hand to it as he crossed the street toward this stranger and his pharmaceutical demands.

He let his hand fall away and he crossed into the parking lot of the pharmacy bearing his wooden staff, his other arm raised in greeting, as he approached Drano's car, like Christ's first apostle crossing onto the sands of Galilee. Waves lapping greenly at the shores and seafoam rushed upward in sheets by slick waters that tilt back into the tidal convolution with the same urgency. Drano emerged from the car into the ragged sunset of the parking lot. Birds chattered crazily and their calls overlapped so that their songs sounded as if glass was being cut with tungsten all about the trees of the surrounding forest. Crickets were already taking up, however thinly. It smelled of gravel dust and honeysuckle and gasoline spilt by the pumps across the street. Drano raised a swollen hand in greeting. The man approaching was silhouetted in light, encloaked, like a wizard wandering out of his hobbit in the woods. He raised his hand. A moment later they were standing before one another glazed in pink meridian light. They shook hands and both men's hands were rough, and each man thought his the softer, though whose was is uncertain, and Drano looked at this harried thirty-something baring a row of fairly crooked and tobacco stained

teeth in a smile. Light glittered all about him. The man spoke from the silhouette of crepuscular light as if he was burning with white fire and speaking charred black from the center.
I'm Ruggles.
Drano.
Thanks for meeting me.
For sure.
Where's your buddy? You didn't say.
Drano was silent and looked at the pavement and then he ran his hand along the car's hood and looked away and he said that he got him killed and Ruggles asked him what happened, and he apologized for this man's loss and Drano said a burglary went bad, and that was the extent to which he was willing to revisit in words this ordeal at the moment.
Someone else is here?
Someone was here until he made the mistake of shooting the head off of my nigga. Now he is not here.
Ruggles nodded. I'm sorry, he said.
The old nigga who killed him got all the food, though.
Really?
Yeah.
How far is it from here?
It's like a mile. We'll go over there.
Ruggles gestured with his chin at the luxury car glittering chromely in the grapefruit flesh colored light. I lost my car, he said.
Lost it?
Yeah.
Drano nodded, as if this was enough explanation. Why ain't you go get a whip from the dealership? Or anywhere?
Can't go back to jail.
Nigga, are there even police here?
I don't know. I've only seen a few cars period in the last couple months. One of them was a cruiser.
Drano looked off through the forest at the measured conflagration of the sinking sun and the perfect diamond bezzle of its perimeter. The wind blew and leaves yellow and red went flipping limply across the pavement of the parking lot. The men watched. Drano looked to Ruggles.
There ain't no one here, nigga. You should've gotten a car.
You're here.
I'm not finna arrest you for taking a car.
You from this area?
Nah, nigga, I came from California.
Is it like this now?
I don't know. I was fleeing charges. My nigga said they was looting and shit in the city.
Ruggles nodded. A hoverfly passed between them in a sort of drunken zigzag and pulsed off into the final rays of sunlight beyond and disappeared as if uniting materially with them.
What the fuck happened, anyway? Ruggles asked.

The husky man with the huge head in the tie-dye sweater squinting in the sunlight. Small eyes hidden away below the canopy of his forehead, dark and child like in their aspect. Injured almost. The huge head spoke.

I don't know, nigga. I was caught up in my own shit.

Me too.

Ruggles walked away from Drano to the glass accordion of the entrance and he peered in and verified that it was still in its last seen condition and he walked back to the man and he thanked him for not going in and tossing it without him. The sky was a red-tinged pink now, and a raven wheeled in the sky above the pharmacy through the dying light. Ruggles gazed off into the woods for no reason in particular and did at once meet the single golden eye of an owl in the yellow mosaic boughs of a hickory tree. It shook out its white plumage and bent sideward, preening along its lower left side. Indifferent.

What I told you about my friend, Ruggles began.

Drano was somewhat delerious, the chemistry of his person so convoluted this day upon waking that he only vaguely recalled something concerning the removal or disappearance of any body. He pinched the bridge of his nose and squinted at Ruggles in the oxblood light.

He got moved or some shit? What happened again? I've been geeking off these pills for like four days.

Drano's hand slipped into his pocket and wrestled a bit bulbous within the plaid matrices, and he produced an orange translucent cylinder with a scatter of pale colored tablets clattering about the bottom for observation and reference. Ruggles nodded wearily.

He fell off a roof. And died from it. I left his body for one night in a house I broke into. I came back the next day to bury him and he was gone. I found his body beneath a bridge, hoisted up on a stick with a candle at his feet. They cut his shit away.

Ruggles gestured about his crotch.

He had moths in his eyes.

Ruggles stood there in the greying light thinking of how his friend looked there, like some early sadistic project of a hideous new world. A frog stabbed through with a pencil, seaweed on his head. Worms curling out of the various punctures in the dancing candlelight. Drano's mouth hung slack. This hadn't touched him so before. The disembodied voice had been abstract and not yet substantiated and therefore any and all of its claims were dubious, for the speaker had no bodily or identifiable culpability, and Drano was a man who came to understand that most men and women lied much more often than they spoke truthfully, and for reasons very often senseless and neurotic. But watching Ruggles, this harried novitiate or whatever he was, stand there outlined in the final light and encloaked in black, with his staff and knapsack against all the wilderness, he understood the man was not lying. Drano fell to questioning Ruggles.

You got a gun? Drano asked.

Ruggles arm swum under his cloak and he, swishing out, brandished the Glock replica.

Damn, nigga. Glock 19?

It's a BB gun.

Drano laughed. Crickets took up in the darkling twilight, unseen and perverse, calling from the shadows. Wind shifted warmly across the planed lot, stars glittering weakly in the silvered heavens above. The moon lightless and hanging counter the setting sun, like some pockmarked

and scarred relative lingering at the periphery of a gathering silent and scorned. Ruggles cleared his throat.
Did you bury your friend? After the burglary, I mean.
Nah. I ain't go back.
Are you going to bury him?
Drano smoothed out the cashmire psychedelia of his sweater and looked off behind Ruggles and shifted tack.
Nigga, you ain't have a piece, for real?
For real.
You better get you one. Niggas getting hung up and shit.
We'll see.
Drano leaned against the car and spat. The felons familiarizing now. A series of silent assessments finished. The dark bird wheeled above and the sky was bluing darkly from grey like an enormous concave and vaulting hematoma. Bats flung out of the woods the color of wood ash and they flit spastically through the falling moonlight like electric things summoned by dark magick and Drano looked to Ruggles and flicked his chin at the pharmacy.
What we finna do here?
What meds do you take?
What you mean?
You said earlier you take meds.
I don't know. I take them from wherever I find them. Drano tilted his head and narrowed his eyes on his interlocutor, half joking. He was not certain if he was being serious or not with this response.
No, I mean, like, you have a medicine you need, right?
Oh, for sure. Yeah.
What is it?
Drano rubbed his chin. Were they there for the same goods. He weighed the alliance in his mind against the loss in pharmaceuticals and he spat onto the glittering blue pavement, a million stars entombed therein.
I drink lean, nigga. And perks.
Okay, we're good.
Ruggles went slanting toward the entrance like some kind of blackcaped vampire who begrudged his condition, stealing into blood banks and hospitals, and Drano sloped along behind him, his head like a small brown paper mache float that the men ushered in overhead in ritual fashion. The iron framed glass doors of the pharmacy were open and Ruggles produced a flashlight as if through prestidigitation out of the drapery of his poncho and a strobe of light went wandering wildly and electrically through the intact pharmacy. Drano followed it with his eyes gleaming glossily in the half moonlight at the door. Ruggles looked back.
You got a torch?
Nah, I left it.
Ruggles gestured with the flashlight and it alit the ceiling of the entrance with a blue-yellow splash of light and it wheeled back down and strobed cleanly through the pharmacy aisles like a true laser and they went tortured and grieving together through the darkened apothecary, Drano

studying the products enshelved with wonder that not Ruggles nor another had pilfered this place, and he heard shuffling in an upper corner and saw a huge hawk's nest improbably patched up there in the dark, formed of clay and twig and pitch, a huge grotesque basket of bird musk and loose feathers. He asked Ruggles to alight the form and Ruggles swung the strobe to the nest for Drano, for he had seen it in various stages of development, coming and going for his medicine every three weeks. The torch issued a wand of light smooth and tubular across the dark of the pharmacy. And the circle of pale yellow distort light slid along the upper wall, dilating and alighting the nest out of the elision of dark. A vicious yellow eye did appear there glinting and flick and vanish in the light and the men felt a grotesque tingling pass through their backs and along their shoulders. There was a rustle in the dark along the far wall. Ruggles shone the light there and saw nothing and they passed down the aisle into the pharmacy proper.

They passed behind the counter through a hinged swinging door and Drano began his standard drag of the shelves, squinting in the dark, and aware that he was working sloppily for his need, and Ruggles halted him a moment there with the flashlight, and it lit him in a dazzling frozen aspect, as if cloaking him where he stood with frost. Drano stood frozen.

Don't, Ruggle said. And he held the flashlight on Drano as if the torch or the cold light it expelled could alone compel his order with substantiated waveform threat.

I got a system, my nigga.

I'll get it.

How am I gonna know you gonna get everything?

You want all of your shit now, at once? Ruggles asked baffled.

Nigga, what, you think I want to come back with a script next month?

Drano sarcastic but realistic from the dark.

What if there's an emergency? We're talking about this being the last fucking pharmacy in, at least, our world. Everything was tossed outside this county.

Nigga. This is the emergency. What do you mean, bro?

I mean, if I need to amputate my own fucking leg six months or six years from now and you took all the fucking opiates out of this place and I have to do it straight up.

Drano rubbed his chin. Moonlight in long white vertices wheeled against the granular glass in the latticed upper fenestration of the eastern wall and it fell slack and moon colored on Drano's face. This shadowy figure with the torch before him in the silhouette of a leptosomal hobbit. This man had a point that Drano could not counter.

Shit, nigga, alright. Let me get the syrup then, at least. Nigga cutting off his leg don't need cough syrup.

All but one bottle.

Drano closed his eyes. He was weighing the alliance again as the epiphemera they appeared to be, whether through blood and oath. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Okay, he said.

What kind of pills are you looking for? Ruggles was moving through the shelving respectfully and gathering up the huge dark bottles from the back upper shelving above the emergency eye wash station and he set these in a sort of stack upward between his arm and side and he drift back up to the counter and brought the bottles down in heavy plastic clank and Drano was there at once, like long awaited news of life or death lay in those sealed pints, a lover at war, a letter. He tore away the plastic in the dark and drank from the full heavy bottle several doses of the treacly

medicine, mollasses in color and form there in the enshadowed pharmacy, this gnomic white groundskeeper diving birdlike back into the dark waters of the pharmacy shelving. Drano had not answered. Ruggles shone the light on him.
What kind of pills are you looking for?
Percocet. Vicodin.
You're not taking all of it. This is the leg scenario, I'm talking about.
What do they got?
I don't know, man. Have you ever sacked a pharmacy before?
Drano licked the cap of the fresh pint. His tongue tingled numbly. Yeah, he said.
Well, that's what it's got. Ruggles said, sorting now through a shelf of different medicines, salts and tetracyclic compounds that he abided for the maintenance of his sanity, their efficacy called sometimes into deep question as these days become dire and darkly mystagogic, all mirth having fled it seemed through the person of Wayne, leaving only cold and dread and something unseen and sick moving across the landscape. Pushing sharpened tree branches through the crooked brown tenting of the boy's back. Through the bunghole. Hair like a woman's in his mouth incomprehensibly. Light flickering there. He took a bottle from the shelf and entrained the light on the shelf below and therefrom he plucked two more. These he brought to the counter near where he had set the syrup. Drano stood there sipping in a relieved and compromising aspect, and he watched this knotty man fall back into the dark working objectively and silently. Drano took up the medications Ruggles had just set there and he tried to say the names of them out loud to himself. Ruggles glanced over his shoulder. He decided he did not care at all.
The fuck is these?
I've got an illness. I've got to take them.
Drano was silent.
Is it contagious? He asked.
No.
Drano was silent. Ruggles was sliding the beam of light along the shelves of synthetic opioids. He glanced back over his shoulder at Drano.
Everything over ten milligrams is in the safe.
Drano was looking around the dark of the store. He put his hand on his pistol and he gazed up at the dark basket of the hawk's nest and in that moment he did hear an approaching rustling and, looking through the moonlight down the carpeted chute of aisled shelving, well stocked with ointments and variations of acetaminophen in cardboard cuboids, he did glim a skunk wobbling in his direction. Whisping black-white hair set in ultimate contrast. Rat face in the moonlight hissing. Drano had the FN out at the moment of sight and with no announcement and with Ruggle's back turned he did shoot this thing twice, the muzzle crumbling away at the incisors and the skunk's face flapped back mouthless, the front of a small weird pulsing brain visible, and it bucked and cried out and sprayed and Drano shot a second time and the furry thing was flipped by the bullet backward off of his clawed feet and stretched dead on his back on the floor some three feet back. Ruggles was on the ground covering his head when Drano looked back. The rank sour expression of skunk musk was tremendous throughout the pharmacy and larger store at once. The hawk or one of its nurtured kin balked hoarsely out from the nest in a disgusting shriek

that carried across the shadows and married itself in wave form to the immaterial darkness. Ruggles from the floor.
What the fuck's going on Drano?
A skunk, nigga. It was running up on me.
You had to shoot it, bro? I thought a fucking cop or something showed up. Holy shit, Drano.
I can't breathe, my nigga.
Ruggles could not breath either, and he pulled the poncho up over his nose and breathed therein from a largely ineffectual tent of his own recycled breath that was soon well fragrant with the skunk's defensive odor. He spoke from this moving bivouack.
You gotta tell me what you want in terms of pills.
The safe.
You want the whole safe? Nothing off the shelf.
Yeah. Well, both.
It's in a safe, Drano. You're not taking everything from it.
Drano was coughing and wretching now in the scant moonlight that slipped silken and snow white down upon him from the upper fenestration along the eastern wall. His mildly iridescent sweater tugged up over the bottom half of his huge face. A cable knit bandit. A cyclone of muted colors on the pearl sweater. He came astride Ruggles in this fashion and followed his bobbing caped form through the back row of the pharmaceuticals, obliquely lit with tooth colored moonlight and sporadic drifts of the flashlight's hoop.
Where it at?
What?
The safe, nigga.
Ruggles swung the flashlight to a corner and trained it on a nondescript cupboard of pale taupe vinyl matted plywood.
That door. It's digital.
Drano slouched over and pawed the door open and looked at the safe, running his hands along the sides of it bilaterally and studying it about the back with his hands like a blind paleontologist. He tugged at the structure, hands gripped along the back and near prostrate before it, and the heavy cube slid jarringly in the wooden slot toward him, cloudlike almost, a steel node on the bottom scratching the vinyl beneath with a thin dragging shriek. Ruggles looked that way. Drano looked up in the sphere of light, eyes rolling crazily, like a man caught red handed at some act of illicit perversion. Drafted into the very structure of law. The tamping of degenerate delectations. Drano looked at Ruggles, something like excitement in his eyes.
We can boost this.
How are we going to open it.
That shit is easy, nigga.
They stood in the dark. Ruggles let the flashlight fall to his side, compacted in a coruscating pale tube of light into the carpet.
What's your plan, Drano? It's one thing if you're sticking around here. It's another if you're just robbing the pharmacy and leaving to the next town that has one worth robbing.

Drano stared in the dark blinking. A limpid glow proliferated dazzling from the base of his neck and ran up the back of his head. Gelid witchblood in perfect measured dispersion through his blood like sleeping gas curling out of the tip of an umbrella.

He had no plan and he told Ruggles this straightforwardly. He told Ruggles with some shame that he was liable to come back at any time after this moment and take every remaining tablet and tincture within his specialty.

If I run out, I mean. I wouldn't take it just to take it.

So what's still on these shelves as I speak has about two weeks left on it, if you stay in town and don't go to another pharmacy.

Yeah. I'm trying to be upfront with you.

Ruggles rubbed his eyes in the dark there. Flashlight at his side beaming out cylindrically and randomly spotlighting a row of various antiepileptics and anticonvulsants in sea glass green plastic bottles. In the circle of alabastrine light, the bottles of medication stood weightily like the emerald curiosa of druids. Ruggles gazed at these, knowing this section of shelfing from memory, and the notion of the seizure as a phenomenon seemed strange and entirely abstract to him, having now moved so long through a homogenous, empty landscape. He still held the collar of his poncho over his nose. Vampyric, a walker of night fields. Evening forests. Green glow and grooved toad. Small black eyes aggravated and lined with yellow. The glow in your heart did not find its genesis in that which to later it yolked its apparent subsistence and all of your nightmarish life unfolded therefrom that singular shift and enduring disparity. Ruggles gazed off through the three dimensional stack of shadows. The pharmacy was becoming almost unnegotiably rank, and the miasma the dead nocturnal had emit in dying was so pungent as to possess an almost clinging and wet quaity about their forms in the dark pharmacy. The stench slid down about them in the shadows like a reeking diaphanous net and both men did to a certain irrational extent actually feel the odor begin to wed itself to the raw materials of their person and garments.

Ruggles slid the hoop across the ground like a wobbling yellow puck over crystalline ice and he trained it on Drano, hunched at the safe with his muted psychedelic sweater girded up by the collar over his nose, as well. Palpating the heavy cuboid there. Shifting it side to side toward him gently, as if guiding a large injured dog out of a kennel. Ruggles cleared his throat.

I can't do this smell much longer. I've got about thirty seconds left in here.

Drano, eyes wide in the light, laughing eyes, bandit's face.

Nigga, take one side of this.

I'm bagging up the other shit first. Because I'm not coming back in.

Ruggles sloped along through the shelving and appeared at the counter with a pained expression on his face as if his maintenance of the property and its contents were his actual paid charges and he took from below the register a plastic bag from a leafy entangled stack. The bag was the color of heavily tanned human flesh and it had the pharmacy's name written in cursive red across the center. He took the bag with both hands and pulled it downward through the stench to inflate and he filled it with the various pharmaceuticals he had so far set on the pass there. Drano looked back from the safe.

Nigga, I can taste that weird ass skunk. Give me a hand, bro. I'm trying to book.

Ruggles wretched at the counter slightly and brought his sleeve up under his nose, and he drift in this posture like a black cardboard cutout to where Drano was still crouched in tactile negotiation with the controlled substances locker. Moonlight pooled about him in scalloped white misty croppings. Ruggles spoke into his elbow, silhouette there, strobe of the torch on the floor absentmindedly. The steady devouring of all sensory fields save the olfactory. Decisions become less precise the more harried the decisionmaker, and an urgency to breathe the fresh night air was upon both men intensely and without another word between them Ruggles swooped down beside Drano and Drano withdrew his hand from the right side of the safe, and Ruggles slipped his hands under, and they lugged the thing to the counter and set it down there heavily and clanging. Panting and wretching alternately. The plywood counter creaked desperately under the weight of the safe, and Ruggles hooked his right arm through the rings of the tawny plastic bag and he said, lift, and they heaved the thing into the air again, flashlight jouncing insanely from Ruggle's back pocket like wild swordplay in the navy blue veneer of night shadow. Drano walked backwards, lugging from the front, and he gazed upward at the ceiling, upon which the flashlight danced frenetically in wooshing lemon meringue dilations that left grey green streaks upon the eyes. Shadows were so gathered in a symmetrical distribution about the center of the ceiling they looked as if spread there with some huge soft instrument. The dark above hung like some kind of huge black whale, hollowed out of its gore and blubber and shellacked and hung by strings of fishing line from the ceiling. Moonlight gathered irrationally about that enormous and hideous black body on the ceiling like darkhearted acolytes prior to form or knowledge itself. An arachnid sensation tingled upon the nape of Drano's neck as he gazed upon this grotesque black penumbric corpus, stepping slowly backward and blindly through the darkled aisles of shaving cream and toothpaste, tissues and toiletpaper. Greeting cards. Ruggles was holding his breath as the blue grey relief of the night sky came bouncing into view through the glass doors. The safe joggled some one hundred and twenty pounds between their spastic and wretching forms. Approaching blue glow of moonlight. A few more steps. Repugnant creature with repugnant long straight mane like human hair. Dark black and white thatched in a villain's aspect.

Feature and light and fog at the entrance, and the men went tumbling crazily into the lot with their tiny steel monolith, coughing and inhaling urgently and coughing again into the night air. Misting from their jaws. Drano's eyes rolled about electrically in the dark, as if he sought vision behind his very head, toddling along in reverse with the safe toward the car. The whisk of pavement beneath their soles. The jangle of pocketed keys with each lurching movement. These men. Whatever they are. A four legged bionic spider with cuboid metal abdomen. Heads for eyes. They set the lockbox down on the pavement beside the back passenger door in a huge careless clatter whose impact carried so staggeringly through the night sky that birdwings could be heard diminishing in their report toward safer silences across the furthest reaches of invisible forest.

It's a nice ride, Ruggles said. He was panting.

The chrome sedan there in the cobalt moonlight looked as if carved from frozen quicksilver. The whole of the sleek body dazzled magnificently like some kind of holy robe. Ruggles set his palm on the chrome curving trunk. It was cool on his palm. Drano glanced over. He was sucking desperately from the warm and crushed velvet air hanging bluely between them. With arms akimbo, he turned his head and spat a globular thook of colloidal cigarette tar across the lot that glistened through the air and landed soundless and invisible in the greater penumbra beyond. He

looked to Ruggles. Felonious sorcerer, becloaked thaumaturge, glazed in creamy blue light, fetching up his staff again from the smooth pavement. As if in defiance of all the blacking heavens above him. Drano watched, still breathing hard and blinking, watching from where he leant against the car. Something feline and crazed about this caucasoid.

Why you ain't go get you a whip like it, man? Drano asked.

Ruggles shrugged. I guess me and my buddy just liked walking around. We were fresh out so there wasn't too much interest in running out and committing felonies as if the world's never going to take back up again. We were happy for the lack of police, really. I wasn't thinking cars and shit.

Drano studied him in the waveform light that hung in shingles across the lot like a huge pearlescent fish skeleton. Could he have killed the friend. I do not know this befrocked alchemist, here portioning the town's medicines, salves, and tinctures to strangers like some promethean pharmacist in an enraptured town. Still chained. Padlocked. Blackbirds went squawing across the ragged grey blue sky above them in a sort of reptilian manner like things conjured by hand. Drano eyed Ruggles and Ruggles met his eyes, curiously. Shadows at their feet rising and sliding and receding like shoring waters.

You ain't kill your homie, right?

Don't ask me that, man. Come on.

What the fuck does that mean, nigga?

It means it is so fucking offensive I'd prefer that you not ask it, let alone think it.

Okay. Okay, my nigga. I don't know you.

I don't know you either. I took you at your word about your friend. Do I need to reexamine that decision?

Nah, chill. Let's load the safe in the trunk.

Can't believe you fucking asked me that, man.

Shit, nigga, I don't know what the fuck is going on with all this shit. Look, I'm sorry.

It's fine. It's just fucked.

You got it?

Yeah. On three.

They heaved this iron sarcophagus into the trunk, and though Ruggles was convinced it would not fit therein, the body of the safe slid easily into the slotted shadows, nigh disappearing in the endarkened expanses there. Scent of freshly cast rubber and new carpet commingling with the damp earthen scents of the forest. Clatter of leaves through the trees beyond. A shadow. Drano pushed a button beneath a grooved ridge on the back bumper, above where there ought to have been a license plate, and the flanged chrome trunk lowered with a sound of air compression and locked shut with a final electromagnetic shudder like suctioned doors in a spacecraft. The thin black air. The blue gradients above the treeline. White dwarfs gathered in scattered groups, glowing pale white across the vaulting and cloudshred night sky. Ruggles spat and tapped his walking stick on the lot twice. Drano looked to him.

What we finna do?

We'll take the safe somewhere to open it, I guess. You sure you got this, man?

It'll take like five minutes, nigga, with a crowbar. What about your homie?

Would you come with me over there?

Yeah.
You might want to check on your buddy, too.
We gone drive by there. A nigga need to get some groceries from that old ass white nigga's house.
Ruggles without a word like some harried Old Testament warlock swept over to the passenger door and it gently tinked open and he slid into the leather seating, staff in hand, resting upon the floor and along his shoulder, poking up toward the sliding glasswork of the interior ceiling, musky sweet smell of cannabis and cigarettes, starlight on the windshield washing through the slant liquid there whitely. Smell of skunk death spray still upon him, whether through his clothing or occuring throughout the region generally now was uncertain. Sick dark spray from behind the anal glands. Black like ink spatter. Of every device with which to defend, a sick stink. Repugnant waddling creature, toddling weirdly across the surface of the firmament like some stickless and enchanted black broom.
Drano entered the car and it sagged heavily and he had a cigarette already lit and Ruggles asked for one, and Drano pulled the pack from his pocket and tossed it across to the passenger seat. Ruggles plucked a cigarette out and returned the pack to him. Drano handed a lighter across the car and Ruggles said, thank you, and he passed the lighter back across the car, their fingers touching at the final moment of return and merger.
Two terra cotta cones inside the car, if viewed from beyond. From the edge of the forest perhaps. Or lying in wait and watching just beyond in the greater darkness. See them, those two glowing orange dots, as if represented the men themselves in the larger state. Like two particles of light falling endlessly down some bottomless pit, having forgotten their silent gravitational origins and awaking in free fall, convinced they were traveling in fact traveling forward and not down. Was hell in the earth actual. The center of the watery sphere was filled with fire, it was true.
Bats shot out like duck shot across the headlights as they whooped out titanically through the dark, shining on the gas station and convenience store beyond. Broken glass still glittering there beside the first pump. Liquid jewels glittering in the light, liquid jewelry like a mystic potion worn about the neck in a medieval gilded glass pendant. They smoked in the dark of the car, staring across at the filling station. Drano glanced across at this new riding partner of his, blue glow about the bottom of his eyes. What was he. Like some manic groundskeeper of things purely theological. Drano flicked his chin at the filling station and convenience store beyond.
Wassup with that?
I kept it like this, mostly. I'll take a bookbag of snacks and drinks back. But I haven't tossed it or anything. This is your cigarette spot, by the way.
Drano backed the car out of the spot at once and he curved smoothly along the dazzling pavement, tires black and gleaming like something animate, and he accelerated gently and they slid together across the ghostly roadway, lights swinging out in quadruplicate before them, with flame colored fog lights, and he pulled the car into the parking lot opposite under the unaccountably lit carport, and they exited the vehicle together. Two fiends passing through shadows for their nicotine, held here as if in some huge glass case for history's later speculation, be there anything left in the end. In the end. They slouched together across the lot under starlight like men who had listened to the word of God and taken to permanent scorn and wandering and witness.

When they entered the convenient store, a man greeted them woodenly from behind the counter. A single light flickered tubular and whirring in the fixtures overhead now. The men looked at eachother with huge demented eyes. The man behind the counter was bald about the top of his head and he did wear a moustache and severe glasses and he had a stern countenance of late middle age and he stood at the enshadowed counter like some forgotten retail Mephistoles, waiting for any traveler with which to persuade and barter. They moved mechanically, numb and ringing, to the back of the store. To the refrigerator. The lined bouyant plastic vessels. Dim colors. Ruggles looked to the front of the store and the man was gone. Drano followed his eyes. The men in a sort of silent mirrored mitosis split and followed along each outer wall's fenestration for sign of the man in the lot. Neither saw a thing there in the shadows beyond but ghost lit parking lot and glossy roadway, yellow stripes parallel and curving, moonlit grass and kudzu and blackened forest beyond. Drano looked across the store over the aisles at Ruggles. He was still at the window. Was this man some kind of magnet for perilous dark magick. Ruggles turned around, eyes grey brown in the flickering flourescence like a werewolf and he shrugged and said, Let's get our stuff and get the fuck out of here. And Drano watched his form go drifting, bobbing along, gathering this and that from the dusty museum of the cooler and the aisles. Climbing now over the counter, eyes flickering crazily back and forth as if the man might return to find Ruggles having usurped his post. Drano shook his head and he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. The image of his son he found facing him on the inward parts of his eyelid and he opened his eyes into the ghastly and rattling, scant yellow light, and he, too, gathered up things from the cooler. And from the aisles he took several chocolate bars and bags of potato chips, a few bags of peanuts. He clutched all these dry goods in his singular left hand. He moved toward the counter, invoking Ruggles.

They got Newports?

Yeah. I've got a carton for you. You need blunts?

Nah. Just the cigarettes.

Ruggles disappeared beneath the counter and he was gone from there as if submerged in some harrowing and he resurfaced, standing himself up on the counter with the elongate cardboard of two selected cartons and Drano's eyes lit up wildly, as if by an enormous blue cord of electricity alone, and Ruggles slid the cartons across the counter and clambered back over. He saw a mouse, another, break tumbling down one of the aisles like two tiny grey degenerates, stealing away to their miniature perversion. Drano glanced in time to see the second mouse's tail go slipping away anneloidally and ribbed pink, passing along the tile and out of sight and he said, let's get the fuck out of here, and the men shuffled out of the store, one at a time, suspicious and eyes scanning everywhere sharp as flintknives for another sign of this possible witness. This attendant. This pedestrian wraith.

Drano drove under a sky the color and texture of a huge black shoat. The sedan purred along like an androidal feline and Ruggles had forgotten what it felt like to ride in a car, let alone such a car as this, and he watched as the leaves flit like bats against the sky through the prismatic and curving passenger window. He gazed off through the trees and the moon hung there, a chalky scallop cleft from its circular heft and tossed away into darkness. Tossed into the sea. One day. Only natural that they might meet. Some glowing atlantis. The moon half sunk in the ocean. A new person. Drowning.

They decided to go to the Old Man's house before Ruggles, at least for the food, according to Drano, and Ruggles bore down in the fundament of his soul for the awaiting scene, original or however altered. He did not want ritually profaned corpuses to compose the active materials of his world and destiny, for he did not know what it meant for it to be so. That the universe had contrived over the course of billions of years to place he and one other person to roam the entire region like two photons across a blind expanse of dark magick. Or was it some creature. The moonlight dragged in neat white strips rhythmically up the windshield and Drano drove with a serious look on his face and with the radio off. The men both lost in their concerns and consciences in their seats. Ruggles broke in.

You've got more shells in that gun?

Nigga. This fits thirty-three. I shot twice. Drano held up the sleek black pistol with a bristled-grip and a cylinder dropping down from the butt of the gun a clear six inches.

What the fuck?

It's an extension.

Yeah. I agree.

It's got a switch in it. Drano handed it over to Ruggles, a flicker of fear passing over him as the pistol officially left his grip. Ruggles held it responsibly before him, studying it.

What do you mean? Ruggles asked.

I mean, it switches it to automatic. From semi-auto.

What, so this shoots like an uzi?

Pretty much.

Ruggles handed it back and shook his head. The materials of death, rendered so effective, so blunt in their fatal mechanism that one need not even aim to end the lives of a reasonably sized crowd in a manner of a few horrifying seconds. Blue light of the dash on Drano. A real bandit. No bandit, am I. Some kind of tortured monk. This man shot dead the man who shot his friend. And he drove home alone from that. Through the weird bucolia and green spectra like something pulled through a stove pipe hat, across other leafy dimensions into being. Ruggles looked at the man's sweater there, soft blue light casting on the veritable galaxy of colors swirling. Like the droplets of a rainbow torn from its arcing band by a cyclone and sent to crazed spattering across the misty blue heavens. Leather smell of car. Skunk smell. Drano glanced over at Ruggles in mild disgust, his face underlit azurely from the panel. Eyes agitated in the frenzied passage of light at his fore.

I think my clothes stink like that fucking skunk, nigga.

We've got to roll down the windows and air out. I think we'll be good. It didn't get on you, right?

Nah, nigga. Come on.

Drano rolled the windows down, dually, and the warm night air came drumming into the car pitter-pattering between the ceiling and doors dumbly and fresh. Drano spat out the window and spoke without looking over.

I know a nigga killed a skunk with his bare hands once. On God. Tried to, at least.

Ruggles looked over, eyes suspect and ironic.

What, did he catch him with his girl or some shit?

Drano laughed. He fished another cigarette out and lit it in a single motion as if he had snapped his fingers and the entire process was underway. He looked to Ruggles.
The nigga thought it was a cat.
Ruggles laughed. So he was in the business of killing cats by hand then?
Drano laughed again. He tapped his cigarette into the winddrift and the ember sparked along the back windows and disappeared in the road below. Smoke curled out of his nostrils.
Aiigh. So, the nigga spent, like, all his time in his backyard. Just like sitting in some dumbass lawnchair or whatever. And this skunk starts wandering around this dumbass nigga's backyard. And. And the nigga thought it was a cat. So the nigga starts feeding it and it keeps coming around. After a little while, though, this weird ass thing started, like, thinking it was running shit. I came by once and saw it hiss at this nigga, because he hadn't put the food out in time. And I told his dumb ass then that it wasn't no cat. That it was a dumb ass skunk. Or some weird shit. He ain't want to hear it, mane.
How'd it go bad?
The nigga was just chilling in his backyard, smoking or whatever, and he's got a bitch over, and the skunk comes, like, walking up or whatever and he's trying to pet the motherfucking thing in front of her, whatever. Weird shit. And, like, off the bat, the bitch is freaked out, because she knew it was a fucking skunk, and she's wondering if this nigga is Willard or some shit, and she tells his dumb ass it's a skunk and the nigga tries to play it off, or whatever, like it was a joke and he, like, kicked it away from them or whatever and the bitch said this thing just came charging at him. The bitch said this thing ran up on him. Like, ran up a nigga's body. And I know the bitch. And she's not capping. And she said this weird ass skunk ran up the nigga body, like it was climbing a rope to the nigga's hair. Using it's claws. And so, like, the skunk got up on this nigga's face and shit, and started biting the nigga and growling and shit. Wilding. And, like, boom, whatever. The nigga is trying to tear the thing from his face and it sprayed the bitch, straight-up, head-shot close range, nigga. And so the nigga tore this fucking thing from his head and started just beating the nigga against the patio, like he was shaking out a rug or some shit. The nigga has the front teeth from where he smashed em out. Had em in a pill bottle. Weird ass nigga. Anyway, so, yeah, the bitch got sprayed so she's acting like a stripper. Running crazy and screaming through the backyard. And, like, the nigga told me he had the thing, and was trying to choke the motherfucker. But, like, there was so much fur and shit, the nigga was choking the wrong side of it. The nigga couldn't tell what was going on. Like, nigga was sitting there trying to choke this bitch by the waist or whatever the fuck it has, and he realizes it and just takes the dumbass thing and whaps it against the side of the house. Brick. Like the lower wall or whatever. Not some vinyl siding shit. And the thing was slept and stretched and he and the bitch went inside or whatever. And the nigga saw it get up a minute later and hiss at them with it's face all fucked up and bloody and it left.
It didn't come back? Ruggles was laughing.
Nah, the nigga say it ain't come back never.
How did things turn out with the lass?
The bitch ain't come back either.
Ruggles laughed and lamented the man's repulsive confrontation and loss and he could feel, for he had not forgotten yet again, the movement of the car over the earth, magnificent and

firmament altering. He had trod everywhere since the beginning. And so the materials of the walkable world were heretofore the limits of his world. Light drastic and unusual shone from the moon, the color of baby spiders, a grey white expansion that rose up and devoured their seated forms and swept them along through a canopy of trees, mosaically arranged in amber and emerald jewels, and through the watery clouds, opaque and enshrouded to their onlookers.

See them go then. Lone lights of the city dragging along like a highlighter through the dark. Dark watcher, dark child at his legs there watching. See them approach, curving through the neighborhood. Drano slunk low in the seat, driving with his left hand alone, sipping from his peach pop and the studying the road. The houses. The grass. Waffle's neck. Gross pulpy stump. Hardly there. Straight across the shoulders, visage and podium given over prematurely to the universe's eventual elision of material reference. The warped gold chain in the grass steaming. Halved. Droplets of seized gold on the earth there like a spread of mystical seed on blood tilled earth. They curved along. The lane dark, the houses they passed all burglarized and neatly reshuttered. Drano did not mention anything of how much currency they had accumulated, nor did he mention the diamonds, for these things were becoming abstractions to him. And the only certain currency at this point now was the syrup. The tablets. Ruggles was glancing across, studying the man lit electrically there in the blue glow of the driver's console. How the incoming scenery was weighing upon him.

You alright?

What you mean?

I mean, we're coming up on where your friend died, right?

Yeah.

I mean, are you good?

Yeah, man. I'm chillin. I'm chillin.

They swept along a final curve and the house where Drano had found the diamonds was on their left and the lights swung down and around the lane and they alit a scene so grotesque there on the lawn of the Old Man's house that it looked at first to be an animate circumstance, so disordered and antic was the arrangement they came upon there.

Nigga, what the fuck.

Drano slammed on the brakes when it came into view and he did have his gun out and trembling before him not even a second later, nearly shooting directly through the windscreen at the lawn. A second away from it. Less than that. And then he saw it was still. They gazed awestruck from their seats at the front yard. There were vultures all about the grass, a dozen of them perhaps, wading around the blood dried lawn with their crinkled leather claws and opal-backed eyes. Waffle's body had been, it seemed, stripped of all clothing and spraypainted gold. His genitals had been cut away, and at his shoulders, the head of some unknowable rotting adolescent girl, heavily made up in blacks and blues and silver glitter, had been crudely mounted from the base of his neck using a twice-sided stake, and the girl's head revolved weirdly above the golden body in the moonlit tableau. The Old Man had been spraypainted gold, as well, and he was sat upright with maggots spilling generously from his wounds in a wooden chair that slanted precariously on the slope of the lawn. Waffle had been positioned on his knees, at the foot of this chair, in a position presumably meant to call forth an image of some partially bartered away act of fellatio, proxied by Waffle through the head of the nameless girl, performed publicly here and alloyed on

the golden person of the Old Man. They all seemed to be moving. The three persons represented at least in partial there on the lawn. The vultures lifting their feet, waddling about these asymmetries, unperturbed by them wearing severe and aggravated eyes that rolled and flicked defiantly in the high beams. Both men seemed to be straining their eyes to confirm that the only living beings on the lawn were buzzards and yet still it seemed uncertain, so monstrous was this spectacle as to have taken on an impression of ongoing animation. Neither man spoke. Drano put the car in park with the high beams pooling across the distance and spotlighting the bodies on the lawn. These golden degenerates. Without a word, Drano opened his door and stepped out of the car and threw the glittering wrist of his right hand up, steadying the pistol, and he shot twice at the vultures, sending them to scattering into the air. Shooting one clean through the thick of its feathers, boring through the pulsing alien lungs therein. The huge black birds washed up and away crying into the darkness above like things called to the sky through unseen and wild suction. They watched from the car as the shot vulture spun about the grass discombobulatedly and sucking, ventilated through the crop and unable to launch. The buzzard clutched drunkenly some paces down the lawn and croaked out enormously against the headlights, almost staring at the men, entreating them. Blood spattered out of the bird's beak and the steaming apertures tunneled through the buzzard's respiratory material. It croaked again, a disgusting hoarse shriek, gurgling, and the gangly black bird went tumbling insanely toward the glittering bodies, as if to defile them in some final act of darkness, and it collapsed short in a huge wet black bundle on the lawn, dying with a weird shudder of the wings a moment later. Drano shot it again. Nothing moved on the lawn. Drano got back in the car and shut his door. Neither man had yet spoke. The corpses were grotesquely alit by the headlights, as if additionally cloaked with theatrical white daubing along their golden curves and bulbs. Ruggles watched as two handfuls of glistening white maggots came tumbling without announcment out of the Old Man's half-open, rigid maw and fell in somersaulting slump into his lap, a great writhing heap, that slid down the thighs of his nude and aureate legs into the grass below, curling about there confused and alien and trying to feed on the immaterial moonlight. How much blood in this grass. Drano sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. He looked to Ruggles.

Nigga, what the fuck. What the fuck is this shit?

Let's get out of here.

Drano's shifted the car into drive and he pulled along the lane until they were parallel with the corpuses, placing Ruggles approximately three-odd feet from the rank gore itself. The golden bodies were glistering and bloated with worms, and flies spasmed frantically into and out of the four available orbital sockets there formically, and their skin, from this distance, could be seen to be swollen and crackling at various points of advanced decomposition. Pink sinewy and yellow mucoidal fat visible at the crackling where the painted skin was beginning to slough off in ragged sheets. They watched as vultures fell once more from the sky like tatterclad black umbrellas and took up on the roof. Waiting. Ruggles looked to Drano.

There's someone watching us.

I know, Drano said.

What do you think?

Drano shook his head. How the fuck is it that you ain't have a gun, Ruggles?

Ruggles shrugged. These gilded perverts in the grass at his shoulder.

I just don't. I'm out on bail. I can't go back. So I wasn't fucking with guns. This hasn't been that. Silence in the glowing vehicle. Crickets could be heard taking up again through the sealed glass, and so, too, could the men regrettably hear the frenzied buzzing of flies about the bodies. Peacock green armor they wear. Meditative arms plotting and so insubstantial as to constitute almost nothing at all. The jots of a pencil might well carry longer through the course of time. In through the right eye, out of the left flies passed in overlapping frenzied cycle. Some strange tournament this passage through the sinuses. And these pornographic trophy figurines to not only host, but preside over and constitute the very animation of triumph in the contest themselves. Flies eat the very brain, don't they. Things of hell. There are things of this earth that find joyfully and slurping their eternal riches, generations of riches, in those materials most rank and dreadful. Things of death. These images. Drano looked to Ruggles, baffled.

What the fuck do you think is happening with this shit, Ruggles?

I don't know. Look, get me away from these fucking props, man. I mean, pull up like five feet or something. The fucking reek.

Drano stared at the bodies. These niggas are, like, filled with worms or some weird shit.

Yeah. That's what I mean, Drano. Pull forward, man.

Someone's watching us, he said. Blue glow on his slack mouth like words compelled from without prior to lingual absorption and articulation.

I know, Ruggles said.

He felt eyes everywhere. A million beaded eyes. Not even necessarily human. The sky itself through the curved planed of the glass sunroof looked like the glittering black pupil of a murderous deviant upon them. Particles under a microscope. Drano wordlessly shifted the car back into drive and it purred silkily down the lane and the headlights whomped out yellow white onto the house with the partially inflated Christmas ornaments sagging, and two figures were startlingly enubilated there, waving wildly from the dark and squinting into the lights. A man and child. The man was enshadowed, but they could see the child wore a balaclava. The pair waved at them from the deep grass of the lawn like ridiculous sunflowers in a breeze of black poison gas. Drano looked to Ruggles, his eyes huge with spontaneous calculation.

What the fuck is this shit?

Ruggles watched with narrowed eyes as these deranged silhouettes waved exaggeratedly, as if for help, from the spotlit yard. Two grotesque effulgent figures, jogging now toward the street. The small figure toddling along after the larger. Ruggles looked to Drano.

It's a trap, he said. No sane person is bringing his child within a thousand feet of that shit. Drive.

The men in the car could hear the pair yelling, help, now. Small voice incoherent, moaning almost, larger voice bored with affected urgency. Drano slid forward ghostlike in chromatic brilliance, a finesse of motion, like the blossoming passage of blood into the watery barrel of a syringe. The man was yelling help insanely and coming upon them. The boy sounded to be barking. Drano looked to Ruggles again who was shaking his head and saying, drive. The man in the street was screaming now, pointing down the street at the display of corpses as he neared hunching down along the lane. Ruggles told him again to drive away. Drano rolled down his window slightly and the car drifted forward like the purest spherical droplet of soldered metal through frictionless air, and the headlights cast out in a massive cuboidal sheet and an unremarkable caucasoid in ghastly leather overalls could be seen staggering about the lane

before the car, the child wearing a dress and balaclava. The man and child took up in the center of the lane, basking, it seemed, in the wild headlights, bellowing out weirdly for help from only a few feet away. Ruggles felt something like electricity run freely and freezing through his person and he pawed mechanically for the Glock replica in his waistband. Drano had his FN balanced on his right thigh already, cradled gently with his right hand. Drano glanced to Ruggles, assessing his study of this motley pair before them.

What in the fuck is this? Do I just shoot this nigga?

Drive around them. Now.

Everything slowed in this spatial agony. Few things there be upon this region of the firmament, and they were found clustering here wretchedly. Drano held the gun against his thigh lightly. Subtle variations in a pulsing signal from a host star. The whisper of gravity upon them. Figures slouching against the force of a sort of mutual repulsion, staggering into and down toward the headlights like things charged with the keeping of darkness. The man swung into view, glistening with sweat. Nondescript and bespectacled. Anneloidal in aspect and quality. Mouth slack and yammering, beseeching them there in the vehicle. Eyes shriveled up in the light, beady and deep-set, encased in glass. The child figure at his side wobbling along weirdly and faceless through the dark.

The child wore a long sleeve floral dress that frilled about the shoulders, gauze peeking out beneath the skirt's trimming, diaphanous and glittering in the collapsing light. Eyes black and demented, hovering into and out of the low orange floodlights. Coal blacked skin. Wearing the black balaclava, backdropped by a sky the color of oil, the child appeared to be nothing more than a set of floating and crazed eyes above a flowery self-propelled dress. Strings of drool loosed from teeth and tongue without source. The pair were standing at the hood. Ruggles felt he could smell them. The man was still yelling the world help boredly as if his exigent status was still in question at this range. There was a sheen of sweat or slick across his pale torso and Ruggles could see the overalls and holster were of black leather. He shuddered.

Drive around, Drano. For real. This is a trap.

Nigga. They're blocking my shit. I'm not going to run over this kid, because you ain't got a strap.

The only reason this doesn't bother you is because you have a gun?

Yeah. But not just any gun.

Okay.

The man and the child fell through the bright light leftward, disappearing from sight, retreating backward crablike and scuttling into the shadows.

Drano. Go.

They appeared again at the left of the car, drifting towards Drano's door out of the larger penumbra as if upon wheels. Small head barely visible gliding in dementedly. The man's lewd pink body shifting weirdly along, drool falling from his face like pulled sugar, rasping forward along the balls of his feet alone, heels raised. Glasses sliding from his greasy brow and corrected. This daughter of death at his side bobbing like a small black flower. They were only feet from the driver's door now. The man was mumbling help perfunctorily and his voice sounded rich with a sort of etherized and secret pleasure, like the voice of a dentist whose evenings are spent in the hallucinatory contemplation of the sleeping gases he has been tasked with responsibly

dispensing to his patients. Drano raised the FN and trained the nose of the pistol out of the lowered window and told the man to stand back. The man continued forward a few steps and Drano shot to his right, and the man startled and backed away again, gangling pink arms held to the sky in histrionic innocence. A few hairs curled from his worm colored chest about the nipples. He began screaming for help again. He was lit by the moon and the child looked over and saw the man's hands raised as such and she, too, lifted her hands skyward in this manner and yammered along with the man's cries, mimicking them. Drano tingled all through his person as if spiders rushed headlong down the back of his neck and down the bony cast of his vertebrae. He kept the gun on this bizarre begging man. Ruggles told him to drive and the man's eyes flicked viciously toward him in the passenger seat and Ruggles met his eyes and cursed him silently. The man kept his eyes on Ruggles after this comment. Drano kept the gun on him. Drano told the man to stay back and the man staggered back a bit, his terrorist daughter stumbling along backwardly as if in reverse.

What the fuck you want? Drano asked.

We need help, he said. The man stepped forward again, the child leaned, too, as if pulled by invisible strings extending out of the man's back.

Stay the fuck back, nigga, or I'm going to stretch you out dead on this pavement in front of your weird asss kid.

We're just asking for help!

Ask for it from there. Or I'll shoot, nigga, on God.

The man seemed uncertain. He was watching Ruggles. He smiled at him and Ruggles asked the man directly why he just smiled at him.

I'm just being polite.

There's nothing to smile about here. Don't smile at me. Don't look at me.

The man continued to look at Ruggles exclusively as he beseeched the apparently more sympathetic person of the driver.

You have to help us.

What the fuck is back there on that lawn? Drano asked.

Someone is breaking into all the houses. Stealing from them. I think the nigger was killed by the white man.

What the fuck did you just say?

I'm sorry, the black man.

Drano looked at the child. The pale palms, dark hands. Coal sockets about the huge eyes. What are these creatures before me. Ruggles repeated himself that he should drive away and the man asked Ruggles from the street, crickets overlapping behind him, if Ruggles thought the man disgusting. He asked that very question, there from the dark of the street. This strangely clad and moist creature bathed in pure moonlight and filth.

Do you think I'm disgusting?

Drano glanced back at Ruggles, curious at the answer. Gun aimed, resting on the glass of the window.

Yes, Ruggles said. Get the fuck away.

The man lurched around in a weird pirouetting circle and when he spun around he met their gaze with eyes black and giddy and clandestine. Eyes that were searching alternately between them

now like a huge insect in decision. The child lilted, as well, circularly after the man, and then growled up at the driver.
Please, the man said. My daughter is sick. She has a skin condition that has gotten very bad. She has to wear this mask. We need a ride. Please.
The child took up a wild yammering.
Drano glanced back at Ruggles. This shit is too weird, nigga.
I know. Drive away.
When Drano then swung his eyes back toward the window and those beseeching goblins there beyond, he did see the barrel of a small white handled chrome revolver flash twice hugely with pale orange flame, dragon breath, and the first shot shattered the driver's side window and missed both men, lodging in the heavy oak of the passenger door three inches above Ruggle's right knee. The second shot grazed the back of Drano's reflexively ducked head and struck Ruggles in the left shoulder, lodging somewhere therein and sending his entire body into a sort of plasmodic expression of seering heat and pain. Drano was firing senselessly out of the driver's side now in triplets. Ruggles was hunched with his eyes closed and his right hand gripping his left shoulder and he was yelling, drive, through the red waves pulsing inside his eyelids, and when the car did not begin to move, and there was only ricocheting gunfire, Ruggles opened his eyes and glanced up and watched as the man passed sidelong into darkness, leftward, out of Drano's range. Pink skin coruscating in moonlight. Wordless now. Behind the car, perhaps. Both men turned frantically in their seats, checking over their shoulders. Drano's lap was filled with glass and he was spangled in a fragmented blue glow with a thousand shattered crystals clung to the body of the dreamcoat sweater he wore. A swirl of dark through the fog of red and orange brake lights. A smaller shadow. Ruggles felt their shadows stretching from the back of the car to the front, falling slack and sickeningly beside him there. Lurching forms at his shoulder.
Drive. You can't shoot through me at him. Drive, man. Drive. Please.
Drano pressed the gas and the car shot forward without lurching and the glass of the back windshield exploded and Ruggles hunched over entirely in the seat, waiting for the next bullet to meet his back, paralysing him as it had Wayne. Drano shot out of the craggy aperture until the gun clicked. Ruggles eyes were closed and he was hunched over, gripping his shoulder, and waiting to feel them round the curve enough to where the man, if he be still alive on foot, would no longer have visual purchase of the car. The curve came and Ruggles sat up and Drano was speeding along crazily through the neighborhood lane outward to the road proper, houses transforming at their sides, and Ruggles asked Drano if he hit the man and he said he had not. That he had tried to but they went rambling together through greater darkness out of sight between two houses.
I told you, Ruggles said. My fucking shoulder.
You wanted me to shoot the nigga in the street, with the fucking little kid right there?
Fuck the kid. I told you to drive away. You fucking prick, Drano.
You ain't been shot before? Drano grinned. There was giddiness or something about him discordant with the circumstances, as if the shootout had unloosed some joy lodged rusting in the clatter of his being.
No.
What you think of it so far?

This isn't funny.
We got a pharmacy in the trunk, nigga. You are going to live.
Ruggles rolled his eyes. He watched blood gather thinly and atramental between the lines of the fingers gripping his shoulder. They drove in silence for a moment, negotiating the thesis of neighborhood street to counterthesis of roadway proper, and taking all that they had just seen and bore witness to, and determining where it fell in the disorder of things, and they passed through the convoluted dark like bats hurtled out on their first flight, unpreparedly and weakwinged, flagging in the rippling wind and lilting breezeward uneasily through the bone colored moonlight. Drano started laughing, unaccountably. Ruggles looked over at this huge head, cackling in the roaring wind, rippling air that swam in and pulled the very glowing shards of glass from the cashmere knit of his sweater backwards through the car like liquid sparks and outward into the night air through the shattered aperture where the rear window had been supremely cast a few moments before. Ruggles narrowed his eyes.
This shit is not funny, Drano. I'm shot and that's the fucking freak who did that my friend and your friend, now. Their bodies.
The nigga ain't kill no one that I know of yet, though.
Yeah, I think he just tried to kill me.
Bro what, you wanted me to smoke him on the pavement for playing with the dead bodies. For some sick shit? Nigga, it's the end of the world. Do you know what kind of fucking freaks are probably wandering around?
I said to drive away.
You wanted me to kill him, though.
I did.
And then, what? Adopt the kid, nigga? Leave her with her weird ass daddy dead on the street.
The nigga ain't kill no one yet, Ruggles.
He just tried to kill me. And you, Drano. I don't think he was sending those bullets in accidentally. Or as some kind of fucking gift.
I tried to smoke him after that, I did.
No luck, for sure? No contact.
Drano shook his head. He had a cigarette out and he was lighting it. He took a drag and blew out, still shaking his head in the windblown sedan, crystalline structures everywhere transferring through the moonlight. Emerging and distorted forms at the windows as they passed along. Blood hotly seeping from Ruggles shoulder. Warm sleeve. Poncho pierced about patched pauldron of this mystagogic armor. Ruggles asked again if any of the bullets hit the man.
Nah, Drano said. I saw the nigga run off. Hide. Whatever. Get the fuck out of dodge. The little nigga, too.
My fucking arm is killing me.
Where are we headed, nigga?
I'm shot, you prick. I don't need to be making decisions right now.
Nigga, you got popped in your shoulder. We need some rubbing alcohol and gauze. Tweezers, nigga. And some perks. You're fine.
Can you get the bullet out?

Drano glanced over, as if this distort and shifting image beheld in the flickering dark of the moving car against a background of swirling leaf matrices and night sky was sufficient enough to make the assesssment. It smelled of blood in the car. Blood and gunpowder. Even in the unglassed winds.

Yeah.

I don't have anything like that. I trashed my house. It's a squat. There's a blue light and a fireplace. Beds upstairs.

I couldn't smoke the nigga for flagging us down and playing with those bodies. Maybe the bodies, but, like, just right there in the street with the nigga kid or whatever.

That's not his kid.

What choo mean?

It's not his kid. The kid was black.

Maybe the nigga adopted.

Yeah. Maybe.

They drove in silence. Drano looked over at the blood seeping down through the stitching of the passenger seat.

We might trade this bitch out tonight.

Ruggles looked over, uncertain, and then nodded. The car. He looked to Drano again.

You have rubbing alcohol at your place, or do we need to go to the pharmacy?

Yeah, they got shit like that. It's white niggas. Rich niggas.

Where are you?

Caldwell or some shit.

You're at the mansion?

Yeah.

They passed along digitally over the winding road straddled by the dark and flailing forms of trees and went curving along bends that dropped off in rocky slopes, downward to water. Narrow was the way and they whooshed along it like epiphemera through a blackened abyss. Ruggles held his wound. It was true. It was not that bad. He felt his body slacken and his thoughts soften in their quality, an easiness washing over him that was alien and not unpleasant. He understood himself to be going into shock, or some comparable state, and he took it for the relief it was. Watching weary and dazed as glass flecked bluely upon Drano's driving arms and unlatched and went flicking backwardly through the whip of wind created by the absence of the back windshield. Drano glanced over in the goblin light. This shot hobbit gone slack in his seat and glazed about the eyes. Drano knew what he was feeling, for he was a man in whom more than one bullet did still roam inoperably. They pulled through the stonemasonry at the entrance of the estate, two entry walls cobbled of cut limestone and quartz, gneisses, and passed along the drive, the rolling green lawn with the still obscured cubes distributed about it, milk light splashing about them, the columnated entry and the chandelier visible like some gilded arrangement of icicles visible through the upper fenestration and Drano parked the car arbitrarily it seemed along the circular pavement that ran to the very front door itself and the men fell out of the car like skydivers, slumping down into the black net of night and slouching, Ruggles following Drano, his eyes rolling about wildly at the brazen and brilliant nature of this decision and they passed into the cool marble anteroom, the mirrored dovetailed stairs, the carpet of which even could be

said to be unaccountably glittering in its cleanliness and whiteness in the spare moonlight. Ruggles was going to get blood on the ground.
I'm going to get blood on the ground in here.
Yeah, it ain't my crib, so if you meet the owner someday, you two can work it out.
Their words carried through the house like things palpable and exploratory of their own will.
I'm a get the rubbing alcohol and shit. Get your fucking cloak or whatever off and anything else you got on under there.
Ruggles looked around.
Where do you want to do this, the fucking front room?
Nah, nigga. The kitchen. There's more light in there.
He directed Ruggles to the kitchen and Drano disappeared away upstairs to some linen closet holding first aid materials and Ruggles peeled the bloodslaked fabric from his torso, the jacket and denim button-down shot clean through. Strange small eye there crying tears of blood. Welling up with inky warm fluid and weeping away down the arm in fits and starts. Ruggles took some paper towels and stuffed the entry of the wound. He looked out of the window above the sink. Melancholy animals forever frozen in stone. Behold the birdshit mottled greystone fox there, indignant. The sad eyed chiseled angel with palms outspread, presiding over a dark green translucent accumulate that stains her sacred marble well and splashes up the side creepingly searching out some earthly materials with which to marry and transform into something sentient. Baby cherub ensconced in moonlight like a lost baby sat upon the rim of a birdfeeder hopeless. Powder blue moonlight like three dimensional puddles hung sideward about the garden. Portals through which to pass. Wavelike unobserved. The eye casts the light itself. Ruggles turned and looked about the kitchen. The solid granite island and the copper cookery hung above it from a complicated steel matrix, gleaming amberly in the slant light. Tinking orange. Lava in the center of the earth churning. Why.
Drano sloped back through the kitchen with a translucent bottle of rubbing alcohol, labeled simply as such with white text on a blue background, and he had towels and a first aid kit, and these things he literally scattered across the island, jarring Ruggles from his soporific and contemplative bloodlet state. Drano went to a drawer and he glanced over his shoulder at Ruggles.
I've got to get it with a knife. Nigga couldn't find no tweezers.
Are you going to cut me?
Nah, nigga, I'm going to tickle the bullet out of you. I just need the knife for a snack first you dumbass motherfucker.
Just get it out of me, you smug fuck.
Hang on, nigga.
You think the bullet fucked up the bone?
Nah, Drano said. It probably made it stronger is what it did, you dumbass motherfucker.
Drano slouched heavily over and uncapped the rubbing alcohol and he threw this upon Ruggles like holy water from the hand of a high priest upon the possessed, and Ruggles shrieked and gnashed likewise, cursing his mender, and Drano washed the knife in the waterlike fluid that ran freely and fragrant from the bottle and up into their nostrils, so pungent that Ruggles had to tighten his eyelids from the stinging. Drano seemed unperturbed. Ruggles could taste metal and

rubbing alcohol. He realized he was parched. It came on like something urgent and he walked away from a stilled Drano and fished through the fridge and drank unbreathing from a lukewarm bottle of pineapple soda and returned to the sink panting and slaked. Drano returned to his side and he prodded with the blue glinting paring knife in that blood welling bunghole and Ruggles inhaled sharply and both men did feel and hear a clean tink from the contact of the blade with the bullet, and Drano told Ruggles to hold onto the counter and Ruggles did so with a grip so whiteknuckled and rigid that when the bullet fell away from his shoulder and clattered across the tile floor dumbly, he went slack as if he had hung from his teeth in that spot, and little remained of his person if anything. Drano took rubbing alcohol and again like some huge black spiritualist casting out a demon he actually threw this onto Ruggles with a whipping motion and his shoulder hissed and Drano set the bottle aside and took gauze and tape from the plastic first aid box, and he packed and wrapped and taped this strange wounded caucasoid the universe had aligned him with. And as if their friends had lived counter to one another, as well. Ruggles leaned back against the counter in a half dream. Drano was doing something with cough syrup now. Ruggles watched this man, still bedecked in his glassy cashmire psychedelic constellation, like something the god of the sky himself might wear. Watched as Drano performed his ritualized alchemy, moonlight marrying with the meniscal purple string in secret mystic incomprehension, and watching it fall into the dayglow yellow liquid like a red tree setting its blood red branches in fast forward, and marrying to the liquid about it in a pinkening blush. The eyes glowing in the huge head. The face serious in the moonlight. Slant beams of blue grey that broke down in the lower regions of burnished lattice tiling. There were a few spatters of blood near where Ruggles stood. Ruggles pushed what remained of his own bottle of lambent yellow soda forward and Drano gathered it up with his huge left hand and poured a veritable ribbon of violet flowers down into the glowing fluid. The cough syrup blossoming and branching and rooting as before, swirling like expressions of octopus ink in a radioactive ocean. Revolving there like some final pestilential storm over a city of sin and transaction and nothing less. Ruggles bent over and picked up the crunched slug of lead from the floor. He held it to the moonlight at the window. Glazed he felt in mind and body, adrenaline depleted, rendering him into a sort of yawning and giggly aspect. Ruggles felt as if he occured within a field of quicksilver. Smooth and enveloped by liquid, the soda and syrup sloshing through his gauntened belly audibly. Drano materialized before Ruggles and handed him two small blue tablets, scored across the middle and printed with a capital M on one side. He could not make out the imprint on the opposite side, numbers of some sort. Worn away in their clatter like old stones on a mountain slope moving unreasoningly seaward over the pained course of ten thousand years.

What's this? Ruggles asked.

Percocet. Thirty milligrams.

Do I need both?

You're shot, nigga. You tell me.

Fuck it.

Ruggles palmed the pills into his mouth and he took up his bottle of pineapple soda and drank freely from it, washing the tablets deep into his center being where they released from their compactness like tiny blue dandelions dispersing their seeds underwater. Drano was chuckling to

himself. Ruggles set his potion down and breathed heavily and stood blinking there in the silent kitchen, still shirtless, as if called to the kitchen for his own butchering and dressing.

Drano looked at the variegated tattooing that covered nearly all of Ruggle's chest and abdomen. Like illustrations conveyed from medieval psychedelia. Frogs with rifles in foxfire green ink. A byzantine image of the Madonna and Child centered between his pectorals. Cats in violent, gleeful caricature. Scars unaccountable. A blue rose. The silhouette of a wolf sniffing at the gaunted hollowing below his navel. A Japanese maneko cat with mechanical paw upheld, stood obediently at the foot of an enormous and corpulent and jolly Buddha. A mouse riding a cat saddled cat. Holding a javelin aloft to launch in his little grey black arm. This illustrated gyrovague. Begrudging manciple of the town's medicines. Left to wander. Another man, a man whose life was a constituency of routine and safety and reliable provision, may have commented or made some queries thereupon, but Drano was a man who himself was decorated in such a manner. To tie oneself to something. Ruggles looked over to Drano, eyes alit with query.

You have a shirt I can borrow?

Yeah, nigga, give me second. I'll go get it.

Thanks.

What kind of vibe are you going for?

What?

Nigga, I'm fucking with you. Hang on.

Drano went pounding out of the kitchen and he was heard bounding along and up the curvature of the stairs and then there were muted footsteps above Ruggle's head in the kitchen. He stood blinking in the light. Shirtless. A moment later he broke at length into the front yard, bare chested through the starlight and the warm night breeze. He fetched from Drano's car his flashlight and he sent it whooping out across the lawn in discoidal effulgence. Crickets and cicadas crying out in discordance and drone could be heard as he padded back toward the entrance. A topiary ringed in the rolling lawn and it looked to Ruggles like some kind of fabled meeting of mythic leaf creatures. Rabbits and animate spheroids hewn from lavender and rosemary. Enormous pigs clipped from box and yew. Lollipops of boxwood. English ivy trained about the wire outlines of these creatures. White pillars at the entrance. Massive door of oak. Hand carved and lacquered and superscribed with leaf and geometric designs. Stone pineapples in recessed bowls of white rock bookending the doorway. Shattered glass still lay at the entry from their initial ingress and it twinkled menacingly in a sort of prismatic constellation of mayhem on the ground there, both inside and out of the house. Scattered across the raised marble entrance like fallen ice.

Ruggles and Drano reached the anteroom at the same time, and Ruggles held the light on Drano and said, Bang, and Drano swatted with his huge bear's arms at the strobe, swinging the shirts in his hand at his photonic assailant as a sort of doubled whip, and Ruggles withdrew on the balls of his feet bouncing, and they trod together into the kitchen in their strange quality of resilience and Drano spun on his feet by the refrigerator and tossed Ruggles the shirts and Ruggles caught them absently. A white undershirt. A soft blue hoodless sweatshirt that had a line of white skeletons holding variegated flowers embroidered in colorful chenille across the chest. He held the shirt up before him, as if for size.

That's a three-hundred dollar shirt, nigga.

What. This? Ruggles held the unremarkable plain white tee shirt before him. It looked like a small ghost in the transmute blue light.
Drano nodded, arms crossed and leaning back at a corner in the kitchen counter.
Yeah, he said. Three hundred. The fuck.
I'm going to get blood on it, you know? Probably both of them.
Drano sighed. That's alright, nigga. Bleed if you gotta bleed.
Ruggles, glossy eyed and moving through a dimension now where time pushed forward glacially and at the charge of his now precise will alone and he looked off through the white scalloped and glowing kitchen fenestration to see black birds lift from the lawn, as if resurrected as a single body, and they winged raggedly together moonward through the blue grey distortion, disappearing from view. Ruggles pulled the shirt over his head and his shoulder throbbed with the extension and he took up the second shirt, heavy and soft and death mocking, and pulled it down his over his warming form, and he felt as if a green glow tunneled through his abdomen and brain and his blood. He grew slack and almost feline in aspect, eyes narrowed and movements hushed now from their former harried state. Drano watched, chuckling. For it to be that way again. Ruggles eyed Drano.
That man is going to continue to try to kill us so long as we are here.
Drano shook his head and held a hand up as if in correction. No. Now that nigga is dead is what he is.
Yeah, if he doesn't get us first. Right?
Bro, what the fuck do you think this weird ass nigga is? I will up it at him on sight now. Nigga, I keep this on me.
Drano brandished the FN in the cool light. Ruggles shook his head mildly and flicked his chin at the gun.
You have a second one of those?
Yeah, nigga, I'm a get it for you. You know how to use it?
Generally, yeah.
The fuck we supposed to do if this nigga rolls up on us with the kid.
Fuck the kid. I see them as a single entity.
It's a kid, nigga.
Yeah, hopefully it is.
The fuck does that mean?
It means I don't know what kind of sick shit can be bred up in a child if some freak wants it bad enough to actually carry it out.
Drano shook his head and spun the cap from his glowing pink cola. Ruggles stared euphorically into the obloid shapes of moonlight quavering on the latticed tile of the kitchen floor. Warmth like electric fur cowled him about the neck and swam upward to his thoughts. Down the lengths of his arm. This smock of skeletons, death lovely. Do I wear this in a dream of a real existence. Warped light refracted through the glass of the kitchen windows. Smell of cigarettes in the house and fabric cleaner. There was a several paneled glass door twinkling just outside of the kitchen that led outside to the garden and backyard. Ruggles was staring out of it at the trembling forest. The angular and magnetic-black silhouette of gnarled trunks and branches. Draping vines and nets of Virginia Creeper. Shadowed kudzu where the corridor of trees met the backyard. Ruggles

watched. A black bird, lone, crossed the length of the backyard, emerging from and returning to the dark of the forest. Moonlight on the glass. Red cloth glimpsed dragging away in a chamber of starlight from the perimeter of the backyard into the forest. Ruggles blinked twice and peered out again. He didn't understand what he was seeing. He leaned closer to the glass. A red cloaked figure enshadowed at the edge of darkness in the trees beyond the backyard.

Drano. Drano. Look. Look, man. What the fuck.

Nigga. What in the fuck, Drano said, seeing, as well, the vermillion cloak glide away, shrinking off into the pure black of the forest like a notion or memory forgotten. They watched from inside as the form came drifted backwards some into view and stopped and turned and faced them. The creature's face was hid from them in the shadows of the mantle it wore and those hung about forest through which it moved. It stood there in silhouette, moonlight soft upon the fluttering oxblood cape. The men looked at one another and back to the forest. The creature spread its arms to the sky in a deranged and necromancing aspect, and it shrieked like a huge sick bird at the men and this carried repulsively across the backyard to their ears. Through the very windows. Echoing now through the woods beyond and the figure was lost from sight, dragging back into the black where the silhouetted trees became inarticulate with the larger outer dark of sky and shadow and night forest.

Nah, nigga, fuck this, Drano said.

Ruggles watched as Drano fetched his gun up out of his waistband and strode out of the kitchen toward the backdoor situated there and greater garden beyond. Ruggles followed along through the strange and soft moonlight, glancing out the window into the trees. There were two marble stairs that led onto an expansive mosaic of stones, all dense with glitter of mica and quartz and kyanite, and the men tumbled down onto these like castaways boarding glaciers from their sinking craft. These hewn stones and their mineral scintilla. The men stood wearily in the dark breathing. Nightbirds chattered metallically and the song of katydids and cicadas from the surrounding forest imbricated into a sort of digital polyrhythm. Ruggles scanned the garden and further reaches of the backyard. The brown twisted plants of the parterre overtaken by clover and greenbrier and pokeweed. Poison ivy. This sedate and resigned holy angel here above her fountain, white eyed at the revelation of a static and mute existence. Scum about the ivory stone bowl. Small cherubs at the foot of each quadrangular hedge, barely visible in the ferity of green and yellow-brown untrimmed grass. Gnomes stood about this crystalline pathway. Enormous glimmering rocks passed through a whining waterslab saw, throwing stone dust wildly about in the air thinner than sand. Flourlike in the hands. Ruggles held the flashlight out on the forest region where the cloaked figure had been seen and Drano held his gun aimed out in that general direction. A flicker through the powder blue light. Red cloak dragging inward toward the light. Hooded figure enshadowed and shifting along the forest floor, as if able to move in diagonals alone. Suddenly hovering leftward out of the light. The men were frozen. They regarded one another for a wordless moment and returned their eyes to the forest. Ruggles corrected the wobbling strobe and the figure was seen floating backward through the forest, a clear three feet above the ground. Ruggles looked to Drano panicked.

Shoot.

Drano shot at the figure and it swooped down and to the right, and dragged away into the forest, and a hideous shriek, not of injury but of insult, was heard to escape from the dodging and

tattered form, crimson and sickening in floating escapade. The figure swung horizontally across the strobe, seen again just at the edge of darkness. Regarding the men, it seemed. Drano aimed the gun at the bobbing form and he did shoot three shots and the greedy eyes and red mantle were seen suddenly racing in toward them, as if following the very strobic path of Ruggle's trembling flashlight, wretched face wrinkled and gaunted and unknowable, whited as if daubbed with paint, eyes glowing yellow, crying out like something with an unaccountably transplanted and now infected female vocal cord. Drano shot wildly and the men watched as the figure swung upward nigh the canopies of trees, tracing about the edge of the garden from this height. They watched with eyes bright with moonlight as this wraith slid redly along the perimeter of the garden, lowering some now. It seemed to be whispering. Ruggles tried to capture the creature in the flashlight and it evaded the strobe, seen for a moment in glimming yellow hanging above the ground of the garden and insususurating at a distance of some thirty yards. Drano shot again, wildly now, in triplets that lit the side of Ruggle's scrunched face with pale orange muzzle flash, and when Ruggles opened his eyes again and swung the light about the lawn and greater forest beyond, the figure was nowhere to be seen. The men scanned everywhere, their eyes flashing in brief and frantic connections between their swiveling heads.

The fuck is going on, nigga?

Ruggles was silent. When Drano glanced over he saw Ruggle's actual jaw slackly hanging open with awe and horror.

Nigga, is you with me? Or you geeking.

Yeah. No, I'm with you. What. What is happening?

Is this why niggas evacuated? Like, we got niggas in red cloaks haunting people and shit? Nerds playing with dead niggas? Ruggles, that nigga was just literally floating.

I know, Ruggles said. I know.

Nigga, fuck this. Let's go in, Drano said. I've got to change my clip.

Ruggles nodded numbly and trundled along behind him inside, backing into the house instead of turning his vision from that agonizing garden and the wraiths bred there. And arachnid was the evening then, and still there in the morse chatter of crickets and the croak of glistening and fat bullfrogs, wet in the moonlight bearing expressions like boneless human faces. As he was backing through the doorframe, Ruggles watched where a narrow path of milky sparkling quartz passed through a bosquet of holly trees and shrubs, a bench beneath an arching wire canopy crawling with softlit vines and there upon the bench appeared before him three shadows. Ruggle shone the light on the spot, stumbling backward slightly into Drano, and it trained on the bench and the figures were gone.

You good, Drano asked without turning around.

Ruggles was inside now. He shut the glass door and stood peering dumbly at the yard, waves of vibrating dulcoration swam through the whole of his hypodermis and his spirit was quietened by this ghoulish red vision, and he did not feel fear save for the memory of when it raced toward them daringly as if invincible. The men seemed to be adjusting to a new kind of unpleasant reality, the nature of which they had very little, if any, meaningful understanding and they moved through this imponderabilia in a sort of anesthetized condition. There in the moonlit kitchen they stood breathing. Four eyes wed to the windows and the woods beyond, oscillating frenetically across the tie-dye confusion of leaf and cluster and grass and statue. Drano set his gun on the

counter and he rubbed his eyes with both hands and shook his head and looked at his thick wide palms, pale there in the shadows, and he look to Ruggles, and this man, this other man had no answer for these things seen. In the resigned and narcoticized eyes of this shot hobbit, there were ultimately only the selfsame questions. The men stood furtively in the kitchen still, looking about them and out at the backyard.

Drano stood leaning in the shadows where the granite kitchen counters met at an angle. He was shaking his head. Ruggles looked to him. Drano dug down into his pocket and pulled out a translucent orange pill bottle therefrom and two pills clacked at the bottom of it, and he rung this like a bell before Ruggles and it clicked weakly.

Let's get that stove and pop it, nigga. I'm down to two. Then we're going to figure out what the fuck is going on.

XXXII

Wolves in the primer and grey is the primer paint through the light this evening, and rag like clouds drift through the murk overhead, and heretofore there will be no light save that cast by the heavens down and that light which awakes in fire at the hands of men and ignescent things of this earth and, Lo, a branch fell from the trunk of a white oak and in falling so it smote the earth, and seeing this, wolves once more in the primer, wolves in the water, in the well, wolves for a thousand years whose song of howl and trot washes across the firmament like the galaxy in miniature, like the milky way expanding in the dark, hovering over the surface of the waters, over the twisted and dry grass of plains, and all the horrid creatures thereunder.

Behold them now, lo, two of these creatures. The night is nigh black, and verily, there, study these new companions, one seated behind the safe, the other in a cycle of leveraged rising and falling above the whining metallurgy. A crowbar handled deftly by Drano in a bright mask of moonlight. Behold him there, dragging forward and pushing down on the iron handle, widening the gnarled aperture ever so slighly beneath an odd carousel of wheeling starlight. The men's eyes searching the periphery often for whatever abominable thing it might bring forth next to their peril. Drano raised up in the light and smote the safe downward with the crowbar with such determination it was as if he willed with this strike that the safe might yield forth the very heat out of which the metal was cast. He pushed down and Ruggles was pulled forward and the steel door gave off a hideous grinding sound and Drano pulled the wedge up from the aperture and tossed the crowbar on the grass and stood back for a moment in the moonlight, fetching out a cigarette and wondering aloud to Ruggles if a crowbar would indeed do it. Ruggles stood from the lawn, and he spat through the dark and searched their surroundings and lit a cigarette, as well, telling Drano that his understanding was that you could not open safes with crowbars. That you either had to drill them or melt them. That was the point. But looking about the lawn, apparently that was not the point. The men flicked their cigarettes carelessly through the dark, and took turns alternating between prying and straddling the safe in the moonlight on the expansive green precision of the front lawn and topiary.

The intercolline estate was not fenced in. Instead it broke freely into surrounding forest on all sides. The estate, in the front, in particular, was situated about the edge of a deeply slanted forest acclivity of craggy rock perch and narrow rows of spruce. Woodbine and clitter and rockslides. The men stood smoking on the lawn as if cupped at the bottom of these slopes, each studying in

his own manner a murder of crows skittering about silently through the dark and the starlight a bit further down the grass. The mansion at their back stood nigh iridescent in the brilliant cobalt moonlight. The blue play of moon about the burnished bobeches and german crystal of the massive chandelier could be seen through the upper fenestration of the face of the home. The expression of this very light swept out to their eyes as it was perceived, and reaching formless into the night toward them, soft and cold, died short of where they returned to continue their prying at the safe. Behold them from the columnated dark of the entryway. Like blatnoy mystics having carried away the Holy Grail. How rough among all ye became whence the weathering shew in the woodwork of thy home, of thy bones and thy love. Behold, for verily, warped are these planks be they borne forth from this rotting alien fundament, and none the better than the other, and a rich man is betrayed heaven.

The moon swung above the men working in the yard and fractalized rings of watery light carried downward upon the heads of their straining forms like liquid blue halos or spotlights sent down in ambiguity from some spectate heaven. Behold, Ruggles is seated on the grass with the safe in front of him, slightly taken back upon his lap and chest. He has straddled the cube with both of his arms and legs to the extent that he is able considering the contour and rocking motion of the vessel. Drano stands before him, and the moon waxes mighty above him and he is backlit bright white now and facing Ruggles there is naught but a bowing and rising black silhouette. The fritinancy of the forest steady and rhythmic about them. Cigarette smoke pulled through the wind further down the lawn. Wind fragrant with evening dew. Loons croaked out from some unseen body of water reflecting the night sky.

Drano obliviously wiped the sweat from his brow with his glass-flecked sleeve and he edged the flat front of the bar back into the aperture he had created between the safe's combination dial and door panel itself. He situated the pry and found his point of traction and pushed downward with the bar against the counterpoint, and the now gnarled metal creaked weirdly and Ruggles had to correct his dampening grip. Drano pulled the crowbar grating back to the mouth of the ingress again and repeated the same prying motion, each effort producing the slightest greater dilation. And soon, Lo, he is rocking back and forth, Ruggles nearly coming off the grass with the safe, and the metal yields more pliantly now and shadows slit the unnatural ingress and the whole of the horrifying evening is, at least for a moment, reduced to naught but breathing and anticipation and the continuous hoarse whine of gnurling metal as the night wheels above them maniacally and without announcement the door of the safe snaps opens from some final blind binding and it swung open heavily and stopped short of Ruggle's right hand on the side of the box. Drano was at once in a different state. He tossed the crowbar to the ground at his right and he stooped low to the cube and Ruggles scrambled up and both men pushed the safe upright on the grass again, and already one could see the treasures therein. A pharmocopeia, orderly in the dark, all of these alchemical jewels there plasticly encased and labeled. White and treesap orange and emerald green. All white safety lids bearing translucent plastic seals. Drano's eyes seemed to glow, whether from within or through some plasticine lunar alchemy was uncertain. He grinned at Ruggles.

I told you, nigga. Nigga don't need no drill for a stove. Or torch. This shit ain't a fucking heist movie.

Yeah, well, I figured there was actually a fucking point to having a safe.

Well, my nigga, there ain't.

A few bats washed through the sky overhead unheard and the men stood perspiring and smiling uncertainly about the safe, and with this done both took up glancing about their persons and surroundings for whatever monstrosity that so may choose to manifest next. Each man noting this in the other, as well. That this dread and its associate vigilance still offered significant contour to the men's wills. Nevertheless, Drano waxed triumphant there on the lawn, and spread his still spangled arms wide in the moonlight like a gigantic essorant bird in a huge nest of forest, scooped from rock, glittering on a herald in a stroboscobe of swirling galactic light. And behold them, now, these men, sorting through the bottles on the grass like frenzied mudlarks on the slope of a swamp. Lining them on the grass. Grinning and paranoid. Bringing the labels up to their eyes and offering comment or speculation on the pharmaceutical teleological features of each. Soft focused and warm-limbed. These felonious chemists slouched in the moonlight on the grass of the yard like cattle. Opioids brought out in wholesale tablet, transdermal, and subdermal form. A series of anesthetics whose very packaging was so laiden with warnings that the men handled the very boxes as it were the cautioned substance itself, transdermally available. Sodium propofol. Etomidate. Ketamine. Methohexital. Several orders of benzodiazepine. All of these on the lawn, sorting dangerously in the moonlight. Ruggles wiped the bright sweat from his brow and sat back and studied their surroundings with a near silenced dread. The moon and the dark heavens beyond enshrouded. A freckling of pale stars. Ruggle's eyes slid heavily closed for a moment and he righted himself, and shook his head as if the materials responsible for this narcotic lapse of consciousness might shake from his hyenoid mane. Lo, the syrup and percocet pulsed gloriously through the material and immaterial corridors of Ruggle's haunted person, and this was the only living hope that he felt. Drano was seated, smoking on the lawn like some kind of small living chimney, so broad and still was he on the ground and so much smoke did he bring forth upward from the huge cubic form of his head. He already had a bottle selected and he rolled it softly back and forth there in the wide of his palm as he smoked and stared off into the night, waiting for the final two tablets he had just ingested to settle into his bone and blood. Ruggles gave him a smirk and scrambled up out of the grass. His left shoulder throbbed mutedly as he pushed himself up from the lawn, and he realized that he had forgotten he had been shot. It did not hurt anymore. He knew he was poured, and his dark magus's eyes felt a pleasant tendency to crossing as he gained his footing upright from the tilting earth. Drano was back to compulsively sorting the selection of bottles on the lawn. He glanced up at Ruggles standing. Ruggles hearkened him.

I'm starving. You want any of your snacks from the gas station?

I'm good for now.

Ruggles slouched anesthetized and euphoric across the yard and he crept into the crystalline explosion of the backseat for his foodstuffs. The windscreen scattered there about the leather in gradients down to the floor reflecting dazzlingly like some shattered mirror of torment and curse. For Ruggles form did pass through them and render them such. Does it not. He dug about the floor and took his chocolate bars and various crinkling bags of trail mix and emerged back onto the lawn beside Drano, already chewing. Drano held up the bottle he had selected. Ruggles nodded at it.

Is that the one?

That’s the one. Couple in there.

He was staring off into the night. He flicked the cigarette and Ruggles watched its curvature through the graveclothen night sky, and he watched it land still glowing some feet from the crows. They jumped away, half flying a few feet off the ground in clumsy backstepping launches, taking up again further down the lawn. Checking about and balking quietly to one another. Drano laboured swiftly up from the grass as if he just realized he was sitting in a puddle of urine and the men gathered up these potent pharmaceuticals and they passed across the lawn back into the house. Drano made directly for the kitchen and took two peach sodas from their useless arrangement in the refrigerator and he poured approximately three ounces of cough syrup into each, finishing the final bottle from the Kentucky pharmacy. He stood in the dark of the kitchen and fished out the newly favored bottle from the safe, and he scratched the transparent plastic seal away from the lid and spun the security cap off this firstly selected container. He pinched up and peeled away the paper aluminum disk sealing the tablets therein and his fingers slid cleanly into the abundance of small blue tablets filled nigh to the the brim of the container, fifteen hundred thirty miligram percocets in all. He clipped up two between his index and middle fingers and conveyed them to his mouth, washing them down with the blooming cola. He spun the huge bottle shut and set it on the counter. Ruggles came sloping into the room and said that they should make a fire, asked if there was a fireplace, in that order.

Yeah, nigga. It might be electric though.

Ruggles passed through the moonlit house as if he walked upon the bed of a vaulting lovely oyster so gleaming and white were its resplendent chambers. He crept along into a living room, padding along the pearlescent carpet guiltily like a wet dog so discordant was his presence he felt with anything pristine and warm, and he went to the fireplace. Great black maw. Encased in paneled glass and chainmail. Literal shields. He knelt on the hearth and the handles yielded and the fireplace opened and there sat an empty log set, cloaked with ash. Ruggles hollered from where he sat that it was a normal fireplace and his voice carried through the house and echoed subaudibly in the recessed and domed ceilings. Drano passed into the room, and through a shroud of dark a hand appeared at Ruggle’s face thrusting forth a bottle of peach soda in which a living artery hung in suspension, revolving slighty, and he took this with a word of thanks and took a sip and set it at his side on the hearth, already glowing with emerald light within the hollow of his bones, rushing warmly through the marrow. Drano stood boredly looking about the room, other person’s living rooms having practiced very little reinforcement upon him through his harried days of professional larceny. Ruggles flicked his chin at the fire.

Let’s gather up some stuff for a fire.

What you mean, like trash?

Wood, Drano. We’ll just grab from the yard.

I’m not going out into that fucking yard to pick up dead sticks so you’re weird ass can stare into a fire and cast a spell or some shit. With whatever the fuck that was. That thing was lively, my nigga.

Ruggles stood up from the hearth and rubbed the ash from his hands down his pant legs, leaning over slightly.

Just keep the gun and the light on me, and I’ll gather up the sticks.

And it was this they did, Ruggles tearing into and out of the hoop of sliding light, caught in darkled attitudes of downward flexure like something chained there to a tree in the yard and running the perimeter in the scobiform moonlight, dark animal blood reasoning within, crazed through the darkness. A traveler without chiminage. Halted at the edge of the forest by a team of woodnymphs. The crickets trill as they have for millions of years and Ruggles gathered up the kindling frantically from the damp grass before them and the larger wood he took from the foot of the forest, and at each moment leaning there down into the bramble and fernbreak did he sense the scythe of the grim reaper glinting above his head, and all through the forest he heard imagined crackling in swiftening approach and wild dashing through the unseen dark, all occuring some distance from the blind crown of his head, swinging up wildly and preparing for violent contact and working quickly and glancing back and verifying that Drano held the gun on him there lost forever at the edge of shadow and feral bucolia, washing into and out of the light as if pulled to and fro by strings, scrambling hither and thither, picking up fallen branches like a frightened hamadryad filling her canvas bag with secret twigs and roots. Fleeing her oaken quarters.

When the bag was full, the urge to sprint back to the house filled him to such an extent it was as if Satan had announced himself and breathed lasciviously on the nape of Ruggle's neck. Drano nearly started shooting into the dark just from the reference of Ruggle's eyes and pace. Drano glanced one last time to Ruggles before dispatching in that direction and saw he had a hand up in caution while running, in advisement. Drano lowered the pistol.

Ruggles was beside him now, breathing hard in the dark and studying the darkness at the edge of the forest. The quartz slats in the moonlight gave the impression that the men stood on two coruscating pads of diamonds. Like Greek Gods conferencing from their bejeweled clouds. Or like two illachrymables balanced upon their entire allotment of tears never shed. Ruggles stood panting. He looked to Drano.

You see anything?

Nah, nigga. I would've shot.

Okay.

They passed into the house and Ruggles swam through this springwarmed hibernacle like the first crazed ignicolist of this new era, gathering up the wood from the satchel and stacking it in gradients on the gilded log set. He turned brightly and asked Drano for some paper or cardboard and Drano immaterialized from this palatial domed drawing room and a moment later was there again in material form with a brown paper bag that he had lifted to convey certain items out of a pharmacy in Kentucky and he slunk backwardly to the the couches and sat sinking into the colossal whiteness. The near invisible all glass coffee table silent and perfect upon the carpet at his feet. Drano leaned forward and groaned and set the tropical storm of his pop thereon, and it appeared to Ruggles to float upon thin air, as a sort of degenerate miracle, so clean and well-cast was the glass.

Ruggles gazed at this and his eyes fluttered and he sat upright against the sedate warmth, and asked for the lighter and Drano tossed it his way and it flew yellow and red-ridged and he caught it and lit the scrunched brown paper beneath the twigs, and the creosote stained stone housing of the chimney could be seen in the low and quivering yellow light. The flamule sliding beneath the paper and the inchoate fire expressing sounds of air suction and release as the bottommost and

driest tinder takes and the greater logs set thereupon after sometime later begin to combust and crackle and pop glowing soot and creosote out of the stone chamber itself, and Ruggles set the paneled glass in place and drifted humming with narcotic sensation in his hind brain over to the couch perpendicular to the one Drano had taken up in, and he fell back sinking through its downy furred pads. Ruggles merged with the yolksoft eggshell loveseat and the fire crackled and hissed and on a sudden thereafter whomped hugely and the men were alit in a demented terra cotta light, their features emblazoned desperate and delerious from their mired and poured thrones. Ruggles slid his eyes in an aetherized glissade to Drano's form.

How'd you get shot?

Drano sat up a bit, tugging at his sweater. It seemed he had decided on this sweater for the evening and for him there was no going back, though it still tinked orangely in the firelit as if bedazzled with reflective flecks of stars.

Well, I got shot twice. Two times.

What happened the first time?

I don't know, nigga. We was, like, coming back from a party or some shit. I was, like, fourteen. Fifteen at the time? Some weird ass shit. And police come along harassing us, whatever, it's late go home, anyone on probation or parole. Just bullshit. And they leave, and we're walking along. It's me and my brother. And a car pulls up. Like five minutes later. Ain't no one get out. No idea who these niggas are. Roll down the window. Where you from. And then they start shooting. Didn't even let me answer. Shot five times from like three feet away and hit me in my pelvis once. That one's still in there. Doctor said there was an artery or some weird shit. But the nigga didn't even let me answer. Just set tripping. Like, they was just on some bullshit. Just trying to kill niggas for not being in a faggot ass gang. That simple. Didn't even let me answer. Say I didn't bang. Because if you don't bang, you're off limits. Supposed to be. But anyway, I ain't even feel that I got shot and I thought I was just chilling and my brother was, like, freaking out and I look down and my jeans are just like soaked with blood and I'm laughing there. Like, I'm just sitting on the sidewalk laughing and bleeding out. Like, a nigga couldn't feel shit. Anyway. Blah blah. Whatever, whatever. Ambulance comes take me to the hospital or whatever. I sneak out once I get a script. Wasn't really shit to it. Niggas get shot all the time in the hood. I was just, like, Oh, okay, now I can say I got shot.

Ruggles nodded. Firelight wild upon his form as if he had conjured it for them from ardent prayer alone. Texts say Moses came down from that mountain with horns sprouted from his head. Horns. He had to wear a veil. God nearly killed him once, with a flint knife. From behind. But the Angel of God stilled his hand. And what opinion of these men.

Were you in a gang ever?

Nah, nigga. That shit is for weak niggas. Drifters. Niggas can't reason for themselves. Or niggas just scared of niggas in gangs so they join. Niggas is weak. Niggas is gay.

Yeah. I hear it gets bad. How'd you get shot the second time?

Drano looked at the fire for the first time and it was twinned in his dark haunted eyes, slotted there in perfect domed miniature on the lower half of the spheres themselves and glistening orangely. He looked away, at the ground.

We was in traffic. Some niggas that was, like, obsessed with beefing with me. Some nigga that was, like, fucking my baby mama or some shit. We had beef, because the nigga was walking

around in his fucking underwear in front of my kid, nigga, who was like two years old. I went over to see my son, right? And this nigga answers the doors in his fucking hanes and my kid, Panda, is like walking around in the background and I just ain't like the nigga vibe and the whole thing. Whole scene on the lawn and shit. Swinging at the nigga in his underwear out there. I knew this nigga was a smoker before he started fucking my kid's mom, too. Crystal. Like, come on, nigga. He banged, too. Inglewood Family. So he was, like, throwing signs and saying that his gang was going to kill me from the front door. With my motherfucking kid at his knees, nigga. Whatever. Weird shit. We have a couple more run-ins outside the club. Because, nigga, I'm at the club and I see this nigga out there like fucking with bitches. Same time period. So I know the nigga ain't serious and he's living with the kid and shit. Going home all fucked up from the club, spending all they money. Bum ass nigga.

So what happened?

So me and my nigga, Waffle, we was in traffic one day. It was like June. So in California it was like, wicked hot. We was just doing our usual shit or whatever. I ain't know if we was working that day or not, flocking, but we went back to the thirties to go my house. We had just gone to the Juice Man. We was driving home to pour up. And so, like, in Cali, there are rows of houses, and then there are like alleyways or whatever that run behind every two rows or whatever. And that's where your garage is, in the back. But it's like, there's a back alley between basically every two blocks. Whatever, you get it. So I was driving and we're down in the thirties or whatever, like, we're strapped, like, nigga, we ain't dumb. Anyway, we're coming back from the juice man, whatever, and we pull into the alley that ran behind my auntie's house. That's where I was staying at. And there's this car waiting there. Just some white piece of shit scraper. Stolen. Rented. Whatever. Not important. And it pulls up and blocks us in the alley, like right before my auntie's garage. I ain't know it was beef at first. I just thought it was some dumb motherfucker who got his hands on a car. So I was like waving at these niggas, it was so bright. It was so bright, I couldn't even see the niggas in the car. And then Waffle said something, like, oh, shit, or something, and then the windshields broke front and back at the same time and I scrambled for my piece and I get, like, bam, hit off the jump, nigga. And it went in through my gut. And, like, I'm good now, or whatever, but when it first went in a nigga, it like was leaning on a nerve on my spine or some weird shit, and I was, like, frozen in the car. Slumped. I couldn't move. Niggas just firing above my head. I looked over and I watched my nigga, Waffle, get out the car without a vest or another nigga and he walked these niggas in the car down, saving my life, until whoever the fuck managed to survive reversed out of there. Niggas hadn't even shut their doors and they was squealing back down the alley, scraping along the whole gates back there, smashing along the fencing back and forth. He hadn't done that the niggas would have killed me. They were already out of the car with they pipes when I was slumped. That's why he hopped out. They was coming to finish me off. Someone had to be more bold or they were gonna die. I think a couple of the niggas died in that car. Because there wasn't no beef or shit after that. And I saw the nigga at the club. I ain't see his boys, but I ain't see shit during most of it to be honest, a nigga got clipped so early. But I ain't never see that nigga at my baby mama's after that. And we ain't say shit to eachother again.

Okay, so you're a dad.

Yeah, nigga, what do you think? I got a boy. Panda. Drano did not tell Ruggles of the exigent circumstances, so ashamed was he of his absence.
You got a kid? Drano asked.
Yeah. Sort of. A girl. Dolphin.
What you mean, sort of?
I mean I got baby mama issues to the extent that I can't even secure an opportunity in which to father. I mean, well, now, that shit's different. They left. They are. Community members. But before that. Her mother. Made custody impossible. Before all this.
Drano nodded.
Waffle was your buddy here. Who saved you.
Yeah. That wasn't the only time, nigga. Nigga got two strikes, too, and came out here to beat life. He stayed upstairs, too. Second bedroom. Obviously that wasn't a nigga's head out there, you know that, right? And he wasn't about that faggot shit neither.
Yeah, Ruggles said in the firelight. I figured.
Drano changed tack. This bearer of duelling ocular flamules. This representative of flame and combustion itself. He looked to Ruggles, gnomic in his wide throne and irradiate with the glow of opioid release.
You ever fuck a black bitch? Drano asked.
I have not. I would not turn one away. Have ye?
Yeah, but prostitutes only.
You dog.
You ever fuck a roller?
What do you mean, a prostitute?
Yeah, nigga.
Ruggles nodded yes with his eyes closed.
Drano laughed, studying the wild firelight. The pills washed through his flesh like something cleansing and the skin of his arms and upper back was horriplated pleasantly in the shard flecked warmth of this sweater from whom tonight he would not depart. He looked over to Ruggles. Something else.
Once robbed this chinese nigga. We were, like, okay. So we waited like six hours for these Chinese niggas to leave for work in the morning, like we get there at like five o'clock and it's still dark and nigga, like forty chinese niggas walk out of that house, on God, and get into and leave out of every motherfucking vehicle around the property. And, nigga, it's like a three bedroom house. Whatever. Weird shit. And then, okay, like, boom, so we decide we're gonna ring and check, my boy had a police radio then, so we fire that up, wait. Okay, seems clear. We ring and run it twice, already had the car back across, nigga, like two fields away in some Rosemeade neighborhood with no cameras. White niggas and chinese niggas or whatever. And nobody answers the door. So we've got the police radio, you know, like and I got, of course, pippy long stocking on my hip and whatever, and so we just go and blamp this nigga's backdoor and everyone's professional. No rambling, no scrambling. No one's like, nigga, running back and forth or just vandalizing shit. It's jewelery, cash, safe - in that order, everytime—Pills or lean nigga if they got it. But these chinese niggas stink, because they don't take, like, normal medicine or something. They ain't have shit. I got, like, maybe one bottle of juice in all my

flocks. Anyway. But check it, like, we're working fast. Pulled the jewelry, lifted every matress. Found a twenty-piece under one of them. And we're in there getting the safe and me and Waffle are ready to ready to lift it. It's small. Like, I can kind of hold it up by myself. Like, nigga, it's about the size of about a microwave. But it's got weight. So it's kind of weird if two niggas are lugging it, or whatever, like it might get weird. Anyway, fuck it, so I pick the bitch up myself and these niggas are sweeping everything again downstairs as I'm lugging the bitch down the steps and when I'm, like, almost at the bottom, like four steps, type-shit, this chinese nigga who had been hiding in a room upstairs comes flying through the air from the upstairs landing, like flying through the dark down the stairs at me with his heel out, like a jumpkick, nigga, and he was screaming, Yoo Poopiehead. And this nigga kicks me and I stacked it, nigga, like, dropped the whole shit and went flying down the motherfucking stairs with it. And I'm, like, did a Chinese nigga really just karate kick me? Like, it was so shocking, nigga. I just felt like I got hit with a brick or some shit. But this nigga did a jump kick from the landing at the top and these niggas downstairs seen it and Waffle goes to grab this little nigga after he steps off me, and the nigga backs up, like he was fighting formal karate or some shit. Like woo, wah. Doing poses and shit. Like some weird insect or some shit, saying get out my house poopiehead get out my house poopiehead and the little Chinese nigga actually walked back over to me. See, bro, I was pinned in a sort of weird way with the safe and my jacket. Like, basically, the safe had me stuck on the fucking ground. And this little nigga walked over to me away from the others and he raised his foot above my face and my nigga Waffle swooped in, like off the ground, this nigga hit this Chinese nigga so hard that the nigga spun around and asked us if we were the burglars and then fell face first into the carpet. And I'm on the ground, like, nigga my back is broken. And I'm still against the wall on the floor. All this shit happened in like fifteen seconds probably like ten seconds. Crazy, anyway. So I'm against the wall and I'm like this Chinese nigga, Kim Wong, just busted my shit and I looked over at him on the floor one of his eyes open and he looks at me and says black nig-nig-ger smell-la like-a shit and-a look-a like-uh-shit-uh and the nigga passes out, snoring off the bat, and I'm laughing, like, nigga, if I can walk. I'm taking a month off forreeal this nigga could have just used the phone and he probably would have fucked all of us over worse.

Ruggles was laughing hysterically and the sound of laughter was so strange and joyfully alien that it frightened the creatures of the woods, as if some bold figure had risen up in decisive claim of this region of moratorium. He shook his medications from the bottle he kept in his right front pocket throughout the day. A blue-scored tablet and an oblong tan tablet into his firelit palm. Drano watched as he swallowed them with a wash of the peach soda. Drano studied him across the fire.

What them do to you?

Nothing fun, it's purely medical.

So what they do?

Ruggles shrugged. He looked away to the fire. They keep me in the driver's seat.

As opposed to what, nigga?

Me being manic. Or depressed. Or totally psychotic.

So as opposed to your brain.

Ruggles narrowed his eyes and tilted his head like a rabbit sniffing.

You could say that, yeah. They keep me in the driver's seat as opposed to my brain's natural inclinations. To propel me through fantasy to certain destruction.
Drano sat up in his chair. Conjuring something from this. Molding it in the shadows of his palms. Okay, he said. So the natural inclinations, or the condition of your brain, these are not your desired inclinations. And this is something that you know for sure in your mind, nigga. Is that right?
I know it for sure in my mind, yes. I know it for sure.
So the mind does not reside in the brain, or depend on the brain.
Well…
Listen, nigga, you just told me that your brain has to ride bitch, that you have to mod-it-out so it doesn't steer you off a cliff. What are you making that decision with? The whole weird ass assessment.
With my mind, yeah.
But you see what I'm saying, right? If you're mind was your brain, then, little nigga, you'd be fucked. There wouldn't be an option out of whose driving that bitch and how fast it's going and how you feel about that. You would just be your brain, you would just be on that ride.
Ruggles nodded uncertainly. You believe all medicine has this indication?
Nigga, fuck no. We're not talking about all medicine. We're talking about you.
We are, yeah. I agree. I've got to say I don't quite like talking about why I've got to take medicine.
No kidding, nigga, you think I'd be standing on the road with a sign if I had that shit.
I'll be honest with you, man, from my experience, I could give a fuck about the mind or its distinction from the body. I've got a spirit that's making these decisions against the poor judgment of the gear I've got.
Nigga, that's exactly what I'm getting at. Don't act like you were standing there the whole time and I was just walking your dumbass up to it, like you done this whole deal in your head before I brought it up, nigga. But look, you commit an act of free will then—and nigga, no one is going to tell me you take those pills everyday because they are recreational or provide some kind of base, untaxed pleasure to you, because, nigga, I have fucked with all of that in jail and not one of those tablets you take makes a nigga feel good, in any way, you agree?
Ruggles nodded vigorously, the fire playing through his wild mane and alighting the side of his face in a tortured aspect.
For sure, he said. They have side effects and whatever, even. Shit doesn't get you high or make you feel, like, happy. They usually just make someone fat with a trembling lip and a disjointed manner.
Well, nigga. They just gave you a spirit.
I had that.
Not that way. Not that way you didn't, nigga. You didn't think of it like that. You made direct leaps, that in all likelihood were because of what your disease, or whatever you want to call your bitch ass deal you've got going on up there, had done to you, and your life. You did it out desperation, which is fine, but a nigga just walked you there saying, look, your illness - you taking those wack motherfucking pills everyday is an act of pure spirit. Fuck a mind, nigga. I lost mine like way before this shit even got popping.

Ruggles laughed and said, Yes. You have.

XXXIII

The men rose from their respective feathery ensconcements and circumvolved before the fire like oracles studying some destiny wrought out in flame though no glowing terra cotta superscription did there appear before their glassy eyes and fluttering lids. They moved and bobbed in revolutions about the huge white membrane of the drawing room, chryselephantine in aspect and color, the diamantiferous moonlight slanting like jewelry hung from a slacking line across the length of the room, the color of seasmoke and fresh smog. Ruggles felt the syrup and tablets propel his remaining life force into a sort of warming frisson through his being and he could not see what lay ahead of him with any sort of real clarity, and he stood there, with eyes orange glistering, groaking into the fire like a man struck dumb by the very details of his Damascene moment. Drano swam through the firelight expansively, wide-winged and drifting gently, flamules dancing about his cashmire form so clean in their outline and pigment it was as if the fire itself was a projection from his very body into the burning hearth and not the opposite. Psychedelic swirl about the front of his sweater like the birth of color itself, borne of firelight and wrought thereupon in the absolute image of variegate genesis. They were smoking menthol cigarettes and staring into the dancing light like men who had eaten dreamfish. Ruggles looked to Drano. Early morning birds could be heard taking up at the window. The sky beyond the window of the dawning day was still eel black, as if cursed or poisoned or altogether dead. Ruggles cleared his throat. Drano looked over at him. They stood on the carpet breathing and blinking in the light. The fire crackled a wild and menacing clatter such as jaws and teeth make in their shattering, and wide pale leaflets of papery ash sucked upward from the combustion, peeling away from the log like layers of parchment, and spinning and flipping up weightless into the chimney like small greywhite firebirds. Ruggles spoke. Of things sepulchral. Bats hurtling through the watery dark sky in buckshot formation. Returning to caves and their clutches.

Are you going to bury Waffle?

Nigga. Do I look like a gravedigger to you?

Well. Would you want to be left like that?

I don’t have any business with this place once I’m gone. I could give a fuck.

How do you know?

Know what?

That you don’t have any business here after you die. No wishes that survive you.

Because I’m already there, nigga. I don’t want any business with this place or my own body as it is, already.

What about your boy?

Drano shook his head. What the fuck I’m a do for the nigga? I’m alive right now and I can’t do shit for him. What the fuck is a nigga going to do when he dead. Like, come on, bro.

Ruggles shook his head. Drano spoke.

Are you going to bury your nigga?

I don’t think so. He was already, like, falling apart when I found him.

Drano shook his head with the sort of blank and unconditional sympathy that men discussing certain dreadful materials grant to one another without question and the fire was like a model of the ocean crafted in wavering orange filament. The windows were greying and geese were heard

to cry out hoarsely in the distance, perhaps above the mansion, flapping along through the crepuscular mist like feathered trumpets and hoarsely announcing the morning across the dewy skies. Ruggles went to the window and there were blue orioles skipping about the ground there, beneath a cuboidal yew and pecking among the scalloped dawn light works transmitting about the lower sections of leafing.

Let's watch the sunrise out there.

Alright.

The men slummocked through the static accumulation of ten thousand agonied mornings awoken in a place or state undesirable and they pushed together through the smog sliding along like bearded elves, mischievous and rolling out of the house sideward over the smashed fenestration about the front door and the men moved through this swirling brume for some time, as if lost in the vapors there, at the bottom of a pit of clouds, revolving in glimpsed silhouette as if choreographed, slouching and eyes squinnied through the early morning steam like turtles awakening on some smog cloaked rock. Blinking. Drano and Ruggles went tumbling likewise, eyes slackened and red-rimmed, glissading about inebriated for some purchase of their narrow path and they stumbled solisequiously and squinting through the door into the whitening dawn which rose up above them there on the lawn like a huge Orphic egg. The sun was not yet in sight, and all the sky was an alabastrine grey white. The grass wore a film of morning dew and they passed along through the bird chatter and mist and took up seats on two of the safes there strewn about and sat for some time silent in the contemplation of the orchestral chatter of birds and the scattered flocks winging through and crying out across the ivory sky. A breeze blew and it was cool and brisk upon their faces and both men tightened their muscles with this gust and crossed their arms, bracing themselves. The lawn ran down before them some two hundred yards of sculptured greenery and now overgrown lush grass. The drive curved along the perimeter of the property line and there was a roundabout at the northeastern corner and there the pavement was laid outwards to the larger road. The estate was encircled by forest almost absolutely. A steep upward sloping acclivity where crags of rocks and clustered pines and spruces grew in serried rows across the entire surface of the hard slanting leaf and stone sloping bowl. This acclivity recommended some three-quarters of the men's foggy vision of the horizon and they watched a family of deer lope in huge sequential bounds through the rowed trunks and they, too, saw foxes moving like flamules through the woods above the rolling smog, sleek and exotic and speculative.

Northern cardinals in blood red feathers tickering about lawn's green curvatures in aggravated mechanical observations. American goldfinches snugly clung in yellow feathers about the boughs of an elm tree like droplets of gold or living lemons. They breathed the misty morning through the nostrils and watched the woods. Still the sun had not risen above these jagged forest crests. White was the sky and they beneath it colorful and defiant and exhausted, silkblooded from the coarsing of opiate, and so, too, that initial gelogenic delerium that settles upon the senses and humors after remaining awake all night until the sunrise. Crows tattered and black across the bleached dawn sky, perching on various rows of telephone wire and cable wire like musical notation. It was as if the men inhabited a world whose history was written as an aside in some ancient grimoire. Ruggles spat from his perch. He was smoking. He looked to Drano. They looked like two fallen gargoyles begrudingly tasked with the guarding of this palace. Made to

perch low to the ground on the materials of their sin. Drano narrowed his eyes in the gloaming light and turned to Ruggles.

You think there's anything after this, or it's just nothing.

Ruggles sat up a bit on the safe. He flicked the cigarette rightward away from the birds. It landed in the grass near the driveway and stood hanging in a thrashing confluence of grass burning one of the blades therein with a permanent circle. He looked back at Drano.

I think life itself is purgatory. That there is no purgatory. That this is that. I've thought it hell before.

I was wondering earlier, nigga, I'm like, is a nigga dead already?

I was thinking that, too. That we were dead. And we just still weren't getting it.

Drano nodded and seemed to weigh something about this silently for a moment and he asked Ruggles what he thought it was they were supposed to get, and Ruggles told him it was probably some realization concerned with how grave of sinners they actually were, as opposed to however delusionally they assessed their own sin now.

Mist hung across the lawn like a sort of burial linen. The men looked through the morning forest. Activity now general across the sloping landscape. A hawk in the branches of a tattered spruce, peering out over the morning. Listening to the men's voices carry smoothly and alien toward him there, of regal aspect and clutching to a fragrant branch above the clouds. Watching other birds weave through the sky in weird synchrony from his perch. Birds to whom this hawk will never signal, with whom this hawk will never sympathize.

The ragged top of the hill came into bright relief as the sun drew upward saggingly as if some harried person scrambled tardily from bed to draw it up manually with rope and pulley. A small figure appeared, mushroom shaped shadow, trundling sideward down from the crest. The light was so white and the trees so clustered that they could hardly see this miniature figure begin down the slope toward them in weird toddling steps. The men looked at eachother. Ruggles said for Drano to get his gun out. The small silhouetted figure went along the treeline through the sunlight tumbling along with an oranguatan's wandering and precarious bipedal manner of transit, and the sun swung up leftward above the trees and shadow fell again across the sloping forest and the figure came into colored relief and the men watched as if mesmerized as a child wearing a balaclava and a white ring-bearer dress with frilled shoulders and gauze sleeves that ran the length of the small arms walked clutching something in each hand cascading down through the forest and already the men could hear the boy's weird cantilating carry downward through the wind and fragrant rows of furry pines and birds carried on, their wings issuing a shuffle like the transferring of leaflets from tree to tree as they change perch. Ruggles eyes were wide with horror and Drano was looking between him and the unaccompanied white frocked child making her way down the foresty slope to them, occasionally breathing into and out of a paper bag, trundling down through declivities of leaf and rock, the child sliding and falling and uprighting herself and toddering downward the further in a zig zagging path like some terroristic anti-fairy. They stood in horror as the child yammered insanely as he shambled along downward, and these nonsensical or glossolalic sounds did echo across the whitened heavens horrisonously like the mumbled and final vicious excitations of a demented brain. The sky a grey tinged white like a old sulphuric boiled egg.

What the fuck, Ruggles said. What the fuck is this.

Nigga, we are living in hell.
Get your gun out.
It's out, nigga. What the fuck. I'm a shoot this kid?
Let's just see what happens.
They watched as the child went propelling along through the lower ranges of the forest hills, the wedding dress in miniature clinging to branches and thickets alike, the child indifferent, the paper bag again sucking inward and expanding at the balaclava's breech, waddling down through the leafy stretches some forty or fifty yards from the driveway and lawn itself now and the men awestruck. Ruggles was watching with his jaw open and he became conscious of this and closed it and scanned the greater skyline behind the child. Drano looked to him out of some silent instinct and they shrugged equally and the child passed through morning fog, staggering smally along and sliding downward upon wet leaves and twigs, nearly flipping once, rolling down the mountain, the dress about the balaclavaed countenance. Uprighting herself and carrying on downward with her effects.
They could see now that the child descend the hill with a black pistol in the hand not holding the paper bag. The man had to sit very still when controlling the child for longer than a few seconds. A host of sparrows swung loosely upward through the wind, as if following the curvature of invisible waves and they fanned out and stood hanging in the wind like small kites and they alit severally along the inward boughs of a Japanese holly clipped so as to take the form of a huge green penguin. The men backed away from the safes they had perched on, smog rolling out across the lawn and garden like some rancid blinding effluvium and swirling before the men as if in theatrical antagonization.
When the child tumbled down out of the forest, the calls it cried out were so animal and bizarre as to seem emitted from some altogether alien tissue. The growls were recognizable for what what they were and the boy sounded them viciously as he appeared and disappeared through the folding vapor, his eyes visible alone and boring in on the men viciously. As if this child could in the newness of its heart already hold a thousand generations of vengeance for these men in particular and them alone and ready to act upon this grudge at the first opportunity. The child's eyes hung low and they were yellow about the sclera and insane with some madness beyond the child's years. The bag inflating and deflating at the mouth. Eyes wide and chattering insanely. Moving up the lawn in fits. Drano held the gun up. The child was some thirty yards from them and it still held the gun at its side. Waddling along in the pitch smeared and leaf clung dress. Branches and burrs embedded all about the diaphanous blossoms of fabric. A red simple red bow about the waist. Ruggles looked to Drano. The child disappeared on the periphery, weaving drunkenly out of the fog and trundling off behind a triangular yew. Appearing again out of the fog on the left of the lawn. Staring at them. And yowling and drifting suddenly to the center of the lawn in a horrifying sort of gallop, eyes burning and fixed upon the men with something like the very primoidal essence of human homicide. The gun still not raised. Ruggles was turning to tell Drano to put his gun on the child and he saw that Drano had his gun aimed and one eye closed. Drano opened the other eye and searched out and found Ruggles.
Say something, nigga, he said.

Ruggles watched the child perform a sort of estrapade in the center of the lawn, the fog swirling about the small doddling form, and he broke in across the lawn with his voice, though the child still yammered to itself.

Put the gun down.

The child stopped and eyed Ruggles through the smog, and he scurried at a slant across the lawn and disappear behind a row of carrot shaped boxwoods. Drano was holding the gun on the trees. Both were expecting fire. Ruggles turned to Drano.

Let's get in the house.

Drano nodded slightly and backed away with the FN at extension, trained smoothly on the boxwoods and the adjacent Cherry Laurel shrub hewn to a sort of pyramidal shape. The boy appeared in the middle of the lawn. Some twenty yards from them. The child growled and smog slid across the wooled countenance and Ruggles scanned the larger forest and crest beyond for movement and Drano held the gun on the lawn and the men walked backwardly through the safes there, like things on a chessboard. They were some ten yards from the front door when the child came curling out the fog with the pistol raised, shrieking wildly. The paper bag blown away at the feet through the graveyard swarm of mist. Drano already had his gun up. Earnest panic filled his eyes and he glanced even in this moment for some reference to Ruggles. He cried out across the dawn to the child.

Put the gun down, little nigga, or I'll kill you, on God.

The child stopped at the voice and straightened the tangled pearlescent dress about itself and cocked an ear forward, still yammering animalistically in a sort of drool soaked mutter, the dress dragging along as if sewn from the filament of the fog itself and the white sun was seen flashing for a moment through the eyes of Ruggles above them in burning white and a shadow on the crest and when he looked again for the advancing creature, it was seen emerging from the fog at the foot of the marble entryway, gun upraised. Drano nudged the FN upwards in the air towards the child in a sort of panic, as if indicating the pistol again in the situation. As if the child had not yet accounted for it. Eyes huge and white with fear and indecision glistering across their colored portions. Drano cried out again across the whited dawn. A host of starlings sketching semi-circles about the grassy perimeter of the mansion launched startled into the sky warbling crazily. Wings scuffing like imbricating whispers. He cried out.

Little nigga. Put the gun down or I'm going to kill you.

The child emerged from the misty billows growling, and Ruggles was looking at Drano's face when the shots began to ring out. The child shot three times quickly and it sounded like living lightning was being sent horizontally beneath the collumnated roof and Ruggles could feel in some adrenal and instinctual haptic manner, without contact, the proximity of the hot tunnelling of the bullets through the air near their persons and hearing the thuck of their wooden lodging in the house behind and the child fell backwards into fog shrouded and Drano shot twice into the mist where the child was last seen and he was still yelling desperately for the child to cease when small white blossoms of fire appeared at the edge of the smog, signaling the report of more bullets and one of these struck Ruggles in the neck and he fell instantly with his hand to his scrag against the home and Drano looked back at him panicked. Several more wild shots glittered hugely from the mist, cracking like thunder across the grey dawn. They appeared like huge sparks sourceless from the smog. Some aimed so low and randomly that they bore through the

very stone of the walkway and ricochet in insane chalky expressions off the marble of the entryway. Some shattering the windows of a bedroom upstairs. The child emerged from the fog and shrieking ran towards them firing. A bullet passed so closed to Ruggles head that he fell clutching to marble, in a sort of huddled slump, one hand to his neck and one dumbly fending off bullets from his head. Drano shot the child the next time it stepped out of the fog, screaming dementedly and staring down the huge man with a sort of unknown boldness and shooting at him directly and the first bullet out of Drano's gun passed through the child's lungs and the next through his head and the child went abruptly slack on the walkway, stretched out dead instantly from the bullet through the brain. Eyes still wide with some ancient insanity boring above into the sky like huge wands fencing against the very heavens, or white flowers from a new grave. The balaclava covering the gore and the black of it slaking up the blood of his brain invisibly. Ruggles gripped his neck. Hot blood ran down along his left shoulder, runnelling all down his rib cage and torso and into his pants. He sat blinking. He could breathe normally, but the world was reeling about so and he could not stand up in such a world that revolved and rocked in such a manner. And he found himself greatly fatigued in this negotiation of the wobbling firmament, and he staggered up and Drano told him not to and was also now holding a hand to Ruggle's neck, and Ruggles saw painless dark blood jump when Drano shift Ruggle's hand out of the way to examine his friend's wound, and Ruggles asked if he was okay and he toppled over crossing onto the marble, blood splattering significantly from his neck with his hands thrown out there before him. Drano scrambled down on the floor beside him, holding another hand to his neck and looking around the anteroom and the stairwell thinking and finding himself thoughtless. Trying to think. Ruggles eyes were closing and vermillion blood was all about his neck and the powder blue sweatshirt looked like a sky with an incoming torrent of blood and the skeletons embroidered there glittered waxing mighty in the white sunlight and Drano told him to wait where he was, horizontal at the foot of the stairs, lain across the marble as if an unknowing participant somehow in his own ancient ensepulchering. Ruggles sat stretched across the tile in a cold tingling fatigue, glaring at the white sun through the anteroom's upper fenestration. How it wandered generously through the prismatic dangling striata of the chandelier above his body. He saw his own blood pooling on the tile and he felt only dizziness and a soporific warmth enveloping him from the wound downward and Drano appeared over him again, splashing him with the rubbing alcohol and putting a towel to his neck and propping him up and Ruggles, dazed and pale, pointed to the windows above and said, Look, he's coming with the clouds, and Drano looked to where he point and braced his pistol but he did not see what Ruggles was indicating. He sat Ruggles up against the wall and had him holding the towel to his gushing wound. It smelt of rubbing alcohol, and Ruggles could feel the sear of the alcohol on the raw flesh inside of his throat, reaching even his glottis itself and the raw outerflesh of his esophagus and Ruggles seized with this pain, grabbing terribly at the wound with the towel and cursing a cry of fuck through the dawn that rang like some sick bell out of the mansion across the entire estate. Everything spinning. He could not make the floor stop its toppling gyrations. It was as if the center fell out of the mansion. Drano swept back over and knelt beside Ruggles and asked how he was doing and told him to keep the rag to his neck and not to go to sleep. Ruggles nodded blearily, telling Drano to go outside at once. That the man was coming. That he saw him riding in on a dark cloud, at the end of a journey of a hundred years or more.

You're getting loopy, my nigga. You've got to hold on. You got to hold on, Ruggles. I'm a figure something out. Just let me think. I just need to think.
Ruggles clutched him with his free hand and told him again to go outside with his weapon. His eyes burned brightly with relative animation from his greying countenance. He repeated himself.
Go, now. He'll kill both of us outright if you don't.
What the fuck do you mean, nigga? This nigga is not bulletproof.
The child alone almost killed us. Go, now. I won't argue.
Drano stood up from besides Ruggles and he passed along out of the front door and sloped down the white stone of the columnated entryway, the FN at his hip, and he eyed the skyline and the smog laiden region of the lawn and topiary and driveway. Scanning. He passed the child's dead body without acknowledgment or glance. Sighting down the barrel into the visible horizon, holding the pistol at extension with both hands. Revolving on the grass of the lawn with the cold-forged hammer barrel steadied outward before him like some kind of mystic third eye or hagstone through which he studied the invisible and goetic elements of the landscape.
Fog swirled lowly along the lawn about his legs. The lawn smelt of burnt primer and wet grass, and Drano breathed slowly through his nostrils like an icedrake, sweeping the driveway and lawn and forest with the aimed pistol and narrowed eyes. Sunlight ragged and white like curdled milk bent sickly down to him there, alighting but not warming, and he searched squinting for where it hung in the sky and wheeled about and found the sun tattered and burning there behind a splintering silhouette of trees on the northeastern crest of the hills encircling the estate. A hawk swung up above the trees in the sunlight, enshadowed in black like some dark soul at the gates of heaven, and it went tunneling down over the trees like a missile with wings tucked and crossed over the yard above Drano as if it had been shot from the forest at him in particular and he watched as it swooped upward back into the light and began to wheel about the western horizon above the furred canopy of the forest. Wrens with their chipmunk colored jersey capered along the dewy grass chirping and pecking at the lawn through low waves of counterspun fog. It was silent but for the creak of the forest and birdsong. Drano watched the wrens bobbing along through the fog singing their alien water song and his eyes glazed with fatigue and intoxication and he realized that he had become distracted and he heard crunching through the forest on the eastern slope and he swung the gun this way, and sighted down the barrel, hands steady on the latticed and bristled grip, and centering the living world between the pistol's eight rifling grooves and willing in this moment to conference with it in this manner alone. He eyed from where the crackling of leaves had come. Brush and branches swayed windlessly there in the forest.
Drano spun around in a sort of homicidal pirouette and he aimed the gun down the lawn and back again into the woods. There was nothing. He turned and looked down the walkway back to the entrance and the open door. Ruggles was slumped against the wall there like something cast helter skelter to the floor upon entering the house, watching him.
Drano scanned the crest of the hill again. The man was standing in silhouette at the northeastern peak and the white sun married with his flesh so that he looked to be gleaming. He stood in a grotesque sort of Abrahamic posture there above the forest like some kind of perverse fata morgana. A rifle shot sunk into the lawn two paces from Drano's position like something that had been singularly sucked there over the course of all of human history out of the reeling universal sky. He staggered rightward and shot at the point on the hillocked horizon where he had seen the

silhouette. There was no one there. He had not seen a muzzle flash. Drano glanced back at Ruggles and could not see him now in the door for the angle and he stepped backwards across the lawn with the FN leveled at the crest of the forest, sighting through one eye alone. Breathing. A thrash of shadows at the top of the bluff. Drano aimed and shot. Three high-velocity bottle necked cartridges went burrowing goldenly through the dawn sky and disappeared at the crest of the hill, where the man had been. Drano scanned the hill again. The man was some thirty yards nearer down the forested slope. He lewdly passed into view and was gone again in the next moment.

There was an unaccountable rasping from the forest floor that worked downward and grew louder but rose into the wind invisibly from the leaves and was perceptibly separate from the man, almost helping to camoflauge his movements. Drano could not see a second person, but he studied this movement distinct from and in front of the man. Steadily working down the hill afore him and not stopping and giving off such a sound in its passage so as to be sliding through the leaves. A dense blue cloud slid before the sun and cold shadow cloaked the hills and the estate itself. Fog roiled across the lawn still and Drano worked backwardly through it toward the entryway, still aiming into the forest under the massive cool penumbra. A second shot cracked across the sky, and gray catbirds were seen lifting from the lawn in a sudden panic, and Drano's hip felt warm and he looked down and touched at the blood there and looked off into the forest and the man was seen rising up pinkly through the blue shadows from behind a fallen tree some fifty yards out now, nearing the bottom of the slope. Drano brought the FN up and the writhing man was croseled there in the sights with his arms outspread and he shot four times steadily and the report of these bullets tore across the sky, as if ripping the very integument of the universe, and Drano watched through one narrowed eye as the man dove to the forest floor and became invisible again among brush and thickets there closing about the foot of the hill. Drano was not sure if he had hit the man in one of the three following shots that propulsed down the lawn like copper spacecrafts launched into the shadows of the clustering trees and bramble where the man had dove. He glanced down at his hip and saw it was not bleeding profusely and his leg throbbed warmly and not unpleasantly and he started backing again towards the house with the FN leveled before him over the steaming grass. He was nearing the entryway and he looked over his shoulder, through the doorway, and saw Ruggles slumped there still watching him. Ruggles nodded and flicked his head urgently toward the action and when Drano looked back down the lawn he watched as an enormous black serpent spilled out of the forest in a sickening homing aspect. Stopping once it had reached level ground and raising up and eyeing him. Drano heard Ruggles call on God from behind him through the now roaring scene. The snake began working toward him across the lawn swiftly and with little prevarication in its path. Drano's eyes reeled hugely in his head and he oscillated the gun between the snake and where the man might emerge in a near panic. A bizarrely entitled and managerial voice carried out from the blind forest.

Put that gun down this instant. Put it down.

The sun slid free of the clouds in its arc and it burnt on the horizon a putrefying white, like some grotesque burning human thing hung up there by a frenzied and ritually murderous cabal. Drano squinted through the needling ivory sunlight down the lawn to where he thought the man would emerge. The forest creaked and the wind blew. A crow wheeled overhead and it cried out a single time and disappeared overhead behind the mansion. The man was seen drifting across the

horizon in his leather harness overalls, shifting to and fro, and Drano raised his gun and the man's beady eyes flicked at him in the same moment, and he was seen dissolving into the ground again, into shadow and flickering forest. The voice carried out from the forest again. Drano looked down the lawn and the snake was sliding cleanly through the fog, fluttering its tongue and swirling around insanely, its yellow eyes scanning everything with such a manner as if all it beheld it were the serpent's unique birthright. The voice came from the woods again.

Put that gun down in this instant. The last time you shot it successfully you murdered your own child.

Drano shot at the point wherefrom he believed he heard the voice originate. He was nearing the entryway now, fumbling backward up the few marble steps. Blood across the white stone at his feet. The blood invisible in the red of his plaid pants, but the right pipe of these trousers heavying with slaked now. He looked quickly to the form of the dead child in the dress and he glanced to Ruggles with an uncertain look and brought the section of slanted forest and fernbreak where the voice carried from in between the sights of the FN.

The man called out again in this moment and he held his fire. Breathing.

Did you understand what I just told you? The man spoke from the forest. He was closer now. Drano scanned the periphery, eyes wild and bloodshot. The man seemed to be working along the forest perimeter instead of descending the bluff entirely and approaching Drano across the lawn. He sounded some twenty yards out now. A breeze blew a poison wind that was unseasonably cold and Drano shivered in his sweater there, and the man's weird voice carried again through the shifting skies.

I say again, put the gun down. I watched with my own eyes today as you murdered your own son on this lawn and did not look twice upon his body thereafter. It is my intention to bring you for the proper prosecution of this homicide. Panda was a child who was developing under my care with extraordinary precociousness.

Drano flicked a panicked eye back at Ruggles and Ruggles was slumped with the towel to his scrag, shaking his head so that it all might be false as if through the motion alone. As if consciousness cast out reality itself. Drano looked down at the dead child in the dress. The eyes were still open and crazed and he would not look upon them again right now and he scanned the forest to his right, and heard the snake hissing invisibly, encloaked in the folding fog, slithering audibly toward the entryway across the grass. Drano looked back at Ruggles.

Shoot the snake, Ruggles said. Shoot the fucking snake.

Drano scanned along the lawn for the snake and checked the periphery for the man. He saw neither. He backed through the threshhold, through the doorway and across the marble, and he stood largely inside the anteroom so as to barricade himself in the door frame. He was still oscillating the pistol side to side between the lawn and where the forest broke nearest his right at the house. And he looked down the sights of the FN as if it were some kind of hypnagogic kaleidoscope through which he was hesitant to fit the whole of his eye against. The serpent hissed and was seen fanning up some ten yards from the marble entryway and Ruggles spoke again, horrified in his bloody corner.

Shoot the snake, Drano. Now.

The man, hearing Ruggle's commands from the woods, interrupted.

Perhaps you ought to stay out of this, should not you? I believe your involvement so far has proven to be most injurious to your person and to what constituted your existence. Tell me, and this is for the nigger, are you a man who loves the world? Your own child came to be a man who loved the world, a man I declare, yes. Verily. For I watched him with my own eyes take the life of a man some seven times his senior, and slake the very blood and brain from the man's stoven skull. Indeed, the child was growing uniquely. His name was not Panda in the end. He had a different name. One he chose for himself when he was reborn. I will not say his true name to you, as I cannot provide his assassin with the materials with which he might pursue him in the next world.

Drano shot from the door into serried rows of spruce that broke into a leafy slope at the front yard's eastern side, some twenty yards from whereupon he stood in the anteroom.

What the fuck is this nigga talking about, he asked Ruggles without looking back. How does this nigga know my kid's name?

Shoot the snake. Shoot the snake the next time you see it.

The windows to the right of the doorway exploded in a spectacular clatter and a bullet thucked into the drywall and disappeared some feet from where Ruggles sat. The voice from the woods. Closer now.

I believe I asked that you remain neutral in the matter of this prosecution. For I saw you watch this man cooly end the life of this boy, this very morning. But will you not let me tell the man, let the father learn of the soul his son took with him to his eternal position?

Drano ejected the extended clip of the FN and it slid smoothly out into his palm, and keeping his eyes on the window, he crabwalked up the stairs as if travelling on a band of light and a moment later he was again at the door, expertly passing these flaxen missiles into the spring of the clip watching the scenery. Ruggles had heard the snake hissing wildly close to the entryway, shrieking almost while Drano was fetching the case of bullets. Drano slid the clip back into his gun, watching the lawn, the sun lifting on the horizon like hellfire as if it were the colossal bunghole of the universe itself. He looked back at Ruggles again and asked how this man knew his son's name and Ruggles was grey-blue from blood loss.

The man's voice came clearly forth again. From the left side of the house now. Drano swung and his sight was partially obscured by the covered entryway, but the voice was clearly coming from that side. The man spoke.

The boy. Again, I will not tell you his final name. But, in the end, he took to the earth. To the ultimate path of the earth. The only service of any utility that can be performed for the benefit of something so vast and self-sufficient. He took to this act with a certain vigor and a near fevered passion that I had not known possible in his species, your species. Not the crazed gun warfare associate with descendants of your blood. Nay, the purest manifestion. Nevertheless, he is in his eternal position now, as of this dawn, having been dispatched there by you, his father by blood and what more than that if ultimately his slayer. I must say. He took after you, in a certain respect. The boy's flaw. The boy. The boy developed a taste for sniffing sprayed paint in the end. And it is my personal opinion that verily this convoluted the essence of the short term of his audience with the material world, and that he was therefore delivered into a similarly convoluted realm in my kingdom.

Drano shot, warning shots or whatever they were, leftward from the door. Into the fog and the shrouded greenery beyond. He turned to Ruggles.

That ain't Panda, nigga. That ain't Panda, right, nigga?

Ruggles eyes burned with grief from the cold pallor of his face. Sweat sung across his brow glistening and death was seeping into the aspect of his gaze. Drano glanced at him desperately. He looked up in a similar quality and repeated his order.

Kill the snake, kill it. And kill him. Don't let them fuck with my body.

You're not gonna die, nigga.

Ruggles just sort of shook his weary head at this and looked away shamefully. When Drano looked back, the man appeared on the walkway, hovering nearly a foot above the pavement and writhing in the air like a man passing through a dark dream, suspended in thin air, and Drano shot at his levitating figure and it vanished into the fog beneath as if moulded from those whirling vapors. The snake hissed from somewhere unseen though close and it wove for a moment out of the fog at the bottom of the marble stairs and slid muskily and fragrant along the bottom step, as if marking it, and Drano hesitated unaccountably and checked his fore again and when he looked up he saw the single glint of the white sun on the long black tinged steel of the rifle like a white bird landing on a thin branch and a silent, bulbous expression of fire manifested thererom and a crack and Drano fell backwards into the house ducking, the bullet flying into and lodging with a loud pock into the lower regions of the hand-carved mahogany balistrade that ran the length of the curving stairs and fenced in the landing above. Drano scrambled to his feet and took up with his back to the wall by the shattered windows. He watched Ruggles shifting himself laboriously and weakly out of sight from the open entrance, the towel at his neck jostling about and heavy with blood already stiff where it ran upon his person and clothing. His skin was so pale as to be a dazzling alabaster and his crazed red-rimmed eyes gazed out upon this scene of mantic dementia, and Drano coud not read what they foretold of this encounter. He saw death therein, for he had seen it before in the eyes of men who did and did not return to life from that state, and he watched it seeping like a dark liquid through a huge body of clear water. The man's voice came again from the lawn.

Your path was so narrow as to call for the collapsing sovereignty of other paths, so narrow was it you trod, or set out for yourself, that your feet carried well outside of the lines there. And what lay outside of that line, that narrow line that constituted your path? I'll tell you. The possessions and paths of others, who trod within their own line and performed service to the earth itself. I say broad is the path, verily. For a man might live as you have and trod bounding over the earth crushing everything outside of the fine line of his existence. You do not seem particularly moved at the death of your child. This is somewhat expected and will be something for a jury of your peers to determine, my comment here notwithstanding.

Drano was listening from the wall, and checking over his shoulders variously. He would not respond. The man seemed to be so close as to be at the windy aperture of the shattered fenestration itself. It smelled of blood and Ruggles tasted blood in his mouth and it felt as if his eyes would not stop rolling backwards, of their own will or fatigue, and he saw his own greying pale skin about his wrists and still he watched this scene, slumped there on the marble bleeding senselessly. Ruggle's eyes did close entirely and they were seen flickering in dream for a moment and opening hugely on a sudden, and he looked to Drano as if the revelation of the

universe itself was upon him. Drano glanced to him quickly and nodded subtly and aimed the FN back around the corner to the lawn and periphery.
Dolphin, Ruggles said. If you stay.
Shut up, nigga.
The man interrupted again. They heard the snake nuzzling the marble stairs at the foot of the balcony, smoothing its scales about fresh blood thereon. Eyes like flamules of anti-matter in evil yellow. A shudder ran down Drano's spine and gooseflesh spread generously across his arms and back. Ruggles was watching the doorway still. The wind blew a gust so mighty that it did clatter the shards of glass on the foyer floor and send them sliding further within the house across the marble. And in the next moment the man's head was seen leaning into the house through the window beside which Drano stood, and Ruggles did witness Drano pull the trigger of the Five-Seven with decisive aim and timing and the report was so loud as to register as muffled and he watched a bullet pass cleanly into the left side of the skull of the man represented in the nondescript bespectacled countenance there and go passing smoothly out of the right side with loosed blood and brain and cerebrospinal fluid, and the man pulled his living bored through head back out of the window into the fog and was heard laughing moments later from the left side of the lawn again. Drano looked at Ruggles as if they were meeting in a dream here and Ruggle's eyes were closing lightly and bouncing open again.
How bad is it? Ruggles asked weakly, indicating Drano's wounded hip.
It's not shit. I'm good. Nigga. Stay awake. Nigga. Stay awake. Or I'm a slap you or shoot at the wall over there.
Ruggles nodded and shook himself up a bit and looked to Drano as if the determination was his to make and Drano shook his head and glanced over both shoulders out the window and the man was seen walking naked out of the fog, coming directly down the lawn, saying, Judas Iscariot did not die in a potter's field. Akeldama itself swept him up in its bosom and delivered him secretly and deep into the earth, where from a room of diamonds he was made master of the material world. You see there are three realms.
Drano shot generously at the naked weaving form and Ruggles could see the gold-tinged bullets connect with the chest of the man, they were so aligned for this vision, and he did not fall and Ruggles was stunned and he watched as Drano went pale and slacked against the wall. Gripping the pistol upward at neck level. Looking up at the chandelier and reciting something to himself in a whisper. Ruggles watched the worm like man shift through the mist beyond and as he watched the black serpent weave thick and glistening upon the marble steps of the entry, spattered with white paint, sliding onto the landing heavily and rearing up and flicking its eyes about viciously and hissing.
Now, Ruggles said. Now! The snake.
Drano fell away from the wall to the right with the gun back into the entryway and he leveled the gun at the snake and it reeled upward as if to meet him, dashing through the air like black ink, and he shot twice and one of the bullets did pass through a bulk of the snakes scales and perforate out the other side and it did shriek a colubrine wail outside the common knowledge of man and so, too, the writhing figure on the lawn and the snake, ventilated through the body a foot below the fangs swarmed up again as if in retaliation and the man screamed and Drano shot again and a bullet took half of it's hissing face away into the smog and the snake fell dead and

the naked man on the lawn scrambled up, shrieking, and Ruggles watch as Drano dropped down into the fog off the stairs and moved enshrouded towards this repugnant being and he did watch as Drano leveled the pistol and the naked man writhing along through the grass fell headlong, bursting at the belly and chest cavity as Drano emptied nigh the entire remaining shots of the extended clip, some twenty shells, into the man's nude torso and, walking closer and standing over him, into his microcephalic cringing head and Ruggles saw from his seat a red flag fall shrieking from the sky into the trees and float hoarsely to the forest floor and steam burning up all about it and at the end of Drano's firing downward the man's head looked like an overturned smashed turtle shell and Drano turned away from this gore sickened in his stomach and he shook his head in disgust, spattered with various brain and blood matter, and he stumbled through the fog and did almost right away thereafter come back upon the now heavily speculative body of the child in the dress and balaclava with no urgency elsewhere to distract and looking upon the eyes in this pale grey morning light was enough confirmation for him and a sort of static overcame his internal being, so comprehensive and excruciating that he moved almost remote to existence itself through it. The ground was reeling. He would not faint. He thought this to himself there. He thought, I will not faint, and the firmament spun wildly and he stumbled leftward off the walkway onto the grass, and birds squawked at his back from the lawn and he heard the sound of wings flapping overhead and he staggered along through the grass trundling against his broken hip through tie-dye vectors of smog and when he reached the entryway and padded exhaustedly up the stairs with a hand at his wound, the snake was dead on the marble there. You could see most of the serpent's inner left jaw. The serpent's right eye and the greater portion of what consituted its face had been carried away with pistol fire. As if it had arrived at the door solicitously with some Edenic temptation and was shot dead without a second thought by some righteous man. He shuddered and gripped the FN again and leveled it downward with both hands as if the snake could come alive again at any moment and watching it keenly he passed through the threshhold into the marble. Ruggles was wheezing and ghost white. His skin was nearly blue. Drano could not hear anything and he passed into the house drifting and Ruggles looked up and his gaunted face gave out and his eyes closed and Drano rushed over and slapped him twice and he came awake for a moment, eyes not even narrowing to focus, and slipped back out into the unseen and was swimming there warm-winged and baptismal, and when he came to again in the foyer of this ivory home, there was a huge black head yelling in his face, and Ruggles floated out again like a feather falling through wind. Drano kneeled by him, tears welling.

Nigga. Don't give up. Don't give up, you pussy ass nigga.

Drano slapped him several times so hard it made the flesh of his palm resound with a sort of hot vibration that was unpleasant and nearly painful. Ruggles coffee colored eyes opened, bloodshot and delerious. He was smiling.

Drano.

Don't give up, nigga.

Look after my daughter. She has a walkie.

Shut up nigga. You can do it yourself. Drano was shaking this bloody mouthed hobbit, hardly even holding the towel to his neck and with little issue for so little blood did now course through

his person. Fear glazed over his smallish eyes and his look was far off and imageless. He clutched Drano.
Don't let Dolphin go to hell.
What the fuck does that mean?
People go bad. And pray for me when I'm done. To Christ. Please.
Don't die, nigga. Don't die you bitch ass nigga.
I'm okay, Ruggles said and he stretched his right arm out to Drano and Drano met his hand and they shook there on what one could not say and Ruggles eyes fluttered closed and he shuddered heavily and then clicked and convulsed again woodenly and eyes blank, spuming air, pissing on the marble and slouching to his position invisibly away from this mess. And Drano with tears welling and sobbing in full, finally alone on earth and able to cry freely, tortured across the marble entry and back out to the lawn, because this could not really be, this could not really be, and now a man believing himself destined to hell if it was, and dismasking this child he loved with his own childlike loving heart and seeing the little mischievious black face like his own there as it was and not for the insanity of its eyes or the blood smeared about its maw and crying out kneeling from the lawn upward in such holy invective so that perhaps all the heavens might hear the accusation and he gathered up this little son of his that he killed and put him down again on the lawn in a weird bundle, the qualia of the dress whelming him somehow, and he brought the gun to his head on the lawn in the fog there. He lowers the gun to his side and drops it on the grass and walks through the fog inside. The hawk slants barreling through the white sky over the trees. Soundless. Windless.